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OVERCOMING THE STREETS: AN EXPLORATION OF THE UNIQUE WISDOM OF YOUTHS

A Thesis

Presented to

The Department of Heath Science

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Public Health

by

Anne L. Roesler

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Abstract

OVERCOMING THE STREETS: AN EXPLORATION OF THE WISDOM OF YOUTHS

by Anne L. Roesler

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of youths who had successfully transitioned from homelessness to independent, domiciled living situations. Eleven former street youths were recruited through the assistance of local agencies and advertisements in college newspapers. Data were collected through in-depth, one-to-one interviews that provided the opportunity for youths to share their stories about life before, during, and after homelessness.

Through in-depth discourse about their experience of being homeless, youths both gained and provided insight into their personal strengths and the failings of service delivery systems. Their stories reveal the spirit and resilience of these young individuals. The study's findings fill a gap in the existing literature on street youths, homelessness, alienation, and resilience. Together, the stories and study results create a foundation for future research that will ultimately inform health and social service practice and policy.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to all of the conversation partners who made it possible by putting their trust in me, opening their hearts, and sharing their stories. I am honored that they so willingly revealed their pain, struggles, wisdom, and humor. Their resilience and ability to overcome the streets are an inspiration to all who are willing to listen to their voices.

I am sincerely grateful to Wendy Hussey for her unique insights into youth issues and her unbounded willingness to discuss my work. In addition, I am indebted to my committee members who were wholehearted in their support of my research.

I want to thank my partner, Tom, for his unflagging encouragement as I made this journey, and I would especially like to thank my son who provided me with the vision and motivation to address this issue. I promised that I would do my best to ensure that this work benefits other youths. This is the first step in that process.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter 1

Introduction

It has been well documented that street youths experience alienation and isolation both before and during their homeless experience (Brennan, Huizinga, & Elliott, 1978; Crystal, 1986; Lundy, 1995; Roberts, 1982). Furthermore, the longer they remain on the streets, the greater the likelihood that they will create tight bonds with other street youths and become "lost to the streets" (M. Covert, Emergency Housing Consortium, personal communication, March 16, 1999). However, it was unknown how youths who have such a sense of "being on the outside" were able to reconnect with individuals in the mainstream in ways that facilitated and supported their transition off the streets and into stable, independent living arrangements.

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of street youths who had transitioned from homelessness to independent, domiciled living. By providing opportunities for former street youths to tell their stories in one-to-one interviews, this exploratory study examined the process through which youths come to feel isolated and alienated, journey into and through the experience of homelessness, and finally reconnect with others in order to transition out of homelessness.

Problem Statement

In the United States, approximately 750,000 to 1.5 million youths run away, or are forced away, from their homes annually (Ringwalt, Greene, Robertson, & McPheeters, 1998; Robertson, 1992). In their study of 390 homeless adolescents in Toronto, McCarthy and Hagan (1992) found that more than half of the youths (52%) had been on the streets for more than one year, and 36% had been on the streets for more than two years. It is unknown how many youths are completely lost to the streets through death or by becoming the next generation of homeless adults, how many eventually return home, or the number who find their way into independent living situations away from the streets.

Street youths are difficult to track, in part, because they are on the move much of the time. In addition, street youths are widely diffused throughout communities, and many avoid contact with homeless shelters, police, and medical service providers who might otherwise estimate their numbers. Moreover, they tend to gather in locations that are difficult for researchers to access. They are often visually indistinguishable from other youths, may be reluctant to admit they are homeless, and may avoid interviewers who they often believe to be predators or representatives of the police or social services (Ringwalt et al., 1998).

In a summary account, Robertson (1992) states that the causes of homelessness have evolved over time and have been written about at length. In the early literature, published in the late 1930s and early 1940s, it was widely reported that street youths were runaways. Prior to the 1950s, runaway behavior was considered to be the result of grossly inadequate home environments. However, during the 1950s and 1960s, accountability was transferred from the family to the runaway who was often labeled "psychologically deviant," based solely on behavior. In the 1970s, the literature began to list multiple causal factors for runaway behavior – the youth, the family, or both. In the late 1970s, the suitability of the term "runaway" came into question when it was revealed that many homeless youths had been thrown out of their family home. As the research has evolved, it has become apparent that youths do not always have a choice about being homeless – some of them have been seriously neglected or abused, some have been actively rejected, and others came from families who depend on public institutions for food and shelter.

Although there are some similarities between homeless adults and street youths, the problems of youths are much more complex. Adolescence is the developmental stage during which the major task is individuation. It is during this time that youths begin to separate from family and establish an independent existence (Robertson, 1992). Although they no longer need

the close monitoring required by children and pre-teens, adolescents need the guidance, support, and mentoring of adults during this phase of development in order to acquire the skills necessary to become self-sufficient.

In addition to developmental considerations, there are also practical aspects. Legally, many street youths are minors. As such, responsibility for them lies with their parents, guardians, or the state. Youths, under the age of 18, cannot legally sign contracts. Moreover, they may be classified as delinquent if they have run away, are considered to be beyond the control of parents or guardians, or are habitually truant from school. Under these circumstances, they are subject to criminal prosecution.

Without a stable place to live or practical and emotional support, street youths may be forced to abandon their education. Without an education, it is difficult to find employment that pays a wage on which they can subsist. Unemployment precludes street youths from becoming independent and excludes them from the mainstream of life. In addition to being unable to provide for basic necessities, that is, food, shelter, and clothing, they are not able to participate in the leisure and recreational activities and other cultural experiences which define being a "young person" (Hartley, 1993). These activities are critical to creating a

self-identity, learning to make choices, and being exposed to opportunities that may ultimately lead to a successful future.

Many street youths are poised at the edge of adulthood. However, because they become homeless prior to becoming individuated, the likelihood of welfare dependency is high. Many have experienced prior contact with the law, and many others are at risk of being recruited into a lifestyle that revolves around illegal activities.

The costs, both direct and indirect, of this set of interacting factors can be exorbitant. These include costs of welfare, costs for foster care of their children, incarceration, and other costs associated with the legal system (Crystal, 1986). The highest cost, however, is the loss of these young people to premature deaths.

Street youths represent one of the most vulnerable populations in the United States. Compared with youths who reside in a home with parents or legal guardians, street youths are at significantly higher risk for health-related problems. These include, but are not limited to, malnutrition, chronic respiratory infections including tuberculosis, HIV infection and other sexually transmitted diseases, hepatitis, substance misuse including injection drug use, depression, violence, and sexual assault. Likewise, street youths report high rates of psychological problems, including symptoms of depression, low self-esteem, suicidality, and

self-injurious behavior. Moreover, many of these youths are involved with drug dealing and prostitution, and some of them are involved in gang activity (Jahiel, 1992; Unger et al., 1997).

Prior to becoming homeless, many street youths experience a sense of failure, stigmatization by teachers, and scapegoating by peers within the school environment. In addition, many street youths report using drugs and experiencing isolation and detachment from parents, peers, teachers, and other adults prior to becoming homeless (Brennan et al., 1978; Crystal, 1986; Roberts, 1982).

It has been documented that street youths attempt to create friendships, and many report having close relationships, while they are on the streets. However, they also report a sense of overwhelming loss accompanied by feelings of abandonment, rejection, alienation, and high rates of suicide attempts while on the streets (Lundy, 1995; McCarthy & Hagan, 1992).

Once on the streets, the loneliness, depression, and low self-esteem that youths experience prior to becoming homeless are exacerbated and perpetuated by the violence and betrayal they experience while living on the streets (Price, 1989). Many street youths experience a sense of hopelessness that manifests itself in a variety of self-destructive behaviors including reckless sexual activity, sharing needles, and a refusal to use condoms

(Lundy, 1995). Often, youths express the feeling that they are not normal with respect to the dominant culture. Their experiences, in addition to their existence on the periphery--avoiding contact with mainstream society and seeking out hidden spaces in abandoned buildings and other remote or inaccessible sites--act to alienate them further and to diminish any initiative they might have to leave the streets (Lundy, 1995).

Even street youths who want to transition into independent living must overcome incredible barriers. Few possess the skills necessary for either economic or residential self-sufficiency. Their educational preparation is often extremely poor, many do not qualify for existing job training programs or are already parents, and some have other barriers to economic independence including criminal histories (Crystal, 1986).

In general, alienation, the lack of a sense of belonging, is a major problem for the majority of adolescents living in contemporary American society (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Calabrese, 1987). At some point during development, many young people feel cut off from one of the four worlds of youth – family, friends, school, or work. For most, the experience is usually not for long and not from more than one world at a time (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). In contrast, street youths experience alienation from most, or all, of these worlds simultaneously and prior to becoming homeless. Once on the

streets, their experiences lead them to perceive life as unpredictable and threatening. Their locus of control over life becomes increasingly External--life is something that just happens to them. They learn to expect disappointment, to distrust others, and in time, become detached from their feelings and sense of self (Price, 1989).

Although significant barriers exist, and it is extremely challenging, some street youths do transition from homelessness to independent, domiciled living. There may be many paths to this end including, but not limited to, the following: (1) reconciliation with family, (2) involvement with the legal system which results in placement in a program ultimately leading to transition, (3) enlistment in the military, (4) contact with a social service program, or (5) accomplishing it on their own.

Most of the literature on street youths is problem-based and quantitative in nature. It documents the reasons they leave home, the existence of feelings of isolation and rejection, and problems with which they are confronted. Although this work is important, there is a paucity of research about the meanings youths attribute to these experiences, the strengths and skills they possess, and the process through which they transition from homelessness to independent, domiciled living. Understanding the meanings street youths attach to their lives, how they recreate their identities, and the ways in which they reconnect with

mainstream society can provide us with insights into their world. These, in turn, can then be used to form the basis of further research that will inform outreach and interventions that most effectively meet their needs.

Research Questions and Objectives

Overall Question

This research was designed to address the following research question:

What are the lived experiences of street youths who have transitioned from homelessness to independent, domiciled living?

Objectives

This research was designed to meet the following objectives:

1. To document the lived experiences of former street youths, a previously unacknowledged population.
2. To explore the process through which street youths transition from homelessness to independent, domiciled living.
3. To provide an opportunity for former street youths to contribute to the public discourse about the issue of homelessness.
4. To provide a foundation for future research efforts that would ultimately inform practice and policy in support of prevention and intervention services and programs that are relevant to youths' lives.
5. To build upon, and contribute to, the existing body of literature about street youths, homelessness, alienation, and resilience.

Methodology

Research that attempts to reveal the nature of individuals' experiences with a particular phenomenon naturally lends itself to qualitative methods. These methods can be used to uncover and understand what little is known about a phenomenon, and they can provide intricate details that are difficult to uncover with quantitative methods which tend to restrict theoretical constructs and impose the researcher's perspective (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Studying the experiences of street youths through quantitative research may inadvertently distort given behaviors rather than disclose their full meaning. Because the goal of this research was to access the richness and complexity of each individual's lived experience from his or her unique perspective, a phenomenological approach was taken.

A basic premise of phenomenology is that individuals have no existence apart from the world. Thus, experience and meaning are derived from being in the world. To extract behavior from its context leads to misunderstanding the behavior and giving it a meaning that it does not have (Knaack, 1984). Hence, the meaning of a phenomenon can only be understood by those who directly experience it.

The main technique for exploring an experience is an extensive dialogue between the researcher and those who are living or have lived it, in

order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective analysis that portrays the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). The specific aim of this study was to obtain rich, thick, comprehensive descriptions of what it means to experience isolation, rejection, alienation, and homelessness as a youth and to explore the process by which youths reconnect in order to transition into independent, domiciled living. Thus, an inductive method that was free from theories about causes and was as free as possible from unexamined preconceptions and presuppositions was used (Beck, 1993).

Population and Sampling. In survey interviews using closed-ended questions, respondents are relatively passive and are not given the opportunity to elaborate. However, in qualitative interviews, those providing information are treated more like equal partners, often guiding the process in directions of their choice. Thus, the interview becomes a cooperative experience in which both the interviewer and the interviewee work towards the shared goal of understanding. Rubin and Rubin (1995) use the term "conversation partner" to describe the interviewee in this type of research. Each partner is viewed as a unique individual with his or her own concerns, interests, and ways of interacting with the researcher. Thus, rather than using the term informant to describe participants in this study, the term conversation partner was used.

In a phenomenological study, the sample must either be living, or have lived, the experience in which the researcher is interested. The number of conversation partners is not as important as is the selection of individuals who have the potential for illuminating a particular experience. What is most important is that the researcher has adequate opportunities to explore the phenomena of interest in depth (DePoy & Gitlin, 1998; LoBiondo-Wood & Haber, 1998). Thus, a sample of 11 former street youths, at least 18 years of age or legally emancipated minors, who had transitioned to independent, domiciled living, was obtained using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Four youth service agencies, two located in an urban area within Santa Clara County, California, one located in the city of San Francisco, and one in a rural area of the State, Butte County, were identified. Agency administrators agreed to assist with recruiting former street youths. Recruitment notices were placed in two Santa Clara County college newspapers, one community college and a large university. In addition, recruitment flyers were posted on the campuses of three local colleges.

Data Collection. In phenomenological research, data are collected primarily through the telling of autobiographical stories. Although the questions asked during interviews were open-ended and evolved over time, the basic interview structure was pilot-tested prior to the commencement of

formal interviews with a key informant who was also a former street youth. Through the pilot interview and subsequent debriefing, it was ascertained that the proposed questions were sufficiently open to evoke feelings and reveal experiences of a deeply personal nature, yet appropriately respectful of the individual. A series of in-depth interviews was then conducted in the home of each conversation partner or in another mutually agreed upon location that was both comfortable and ensured privacy.

Two strategies were used to record information – audiotapes and field notes. Because interviews were open-ended, with conversation partners providing long, detailed accounts that were difficult to write verbatim, sessions were audiotaped and then transcribed (DePoy & Gitlin, 1998). Field notes were used to record visual cues that would have been missed by the use of audiotapes alone.

Furthermore, the researcher's personal reactions, impressions, and reflections regarding the conversation partners and process were written down and used as one way to prevent personal biases from interfering with data analysis.

Data Analysis. Since the process of qualitative work is iterative, analysis commenced with the first interview and ended with the final interpretation and writing. Audiotapes were transcribed into verbatim written records, the accuracy of which was verified by comparing the tapes

with the transcripts. Transcripts were read and reread in order to find commonalities. Categories were created for each recurrent topic. These original categories were used as the basis for analyzing new data which were either classified into an existing category or used to modify or create new categories. Relationships among and between categories were explored and analyzed in order to identify underlying themes. Themes were used to provide rich, thick descriptions of the lived experiences of conversation partners (DePoy & Gitlin, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness of qualitative research may be judged by its credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility refers to the confidence one can have in the truth of the results. It can be established through the use of peer debriefings and member checks.

In this study, peer debriefings were accomplished by sharing the data and ongoing data analysis with members of the researcher's thesis committee. Member checks involved conversation partners who were asked to provide feedback at periodic intervals during data analysis, interpretation, and the formulation of conclusions. This served to ensure that the essence of their experiences was adequately described.

Dependability refers to the stability of findings over time, and confirmability refers to the objectivity of the data. Both were accomplished

through the use of an audit trail. In addition, intersubjective agreement between the researcher and an independent judge was achieved at each step of data analysis. The independent judge coded 10% of the data, and comparisons between the researcher's and the judge's codes were made. An agreement rate of 86% was reached with 85% being considered very good for coding purposes (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991).

Transferability refers to whether the findings can be transferred to similar contexts or situations and still preserve the meanings, interpretations, and inferences of the research. The goal of qualitative research is to produce in-depth understandings and knowledge of particular phenomena (Leininger, 1994). This was accomplished by providing the widest range of rich, thick descriptions from which someone interested in making a transfer could reach their own conclusion about its applicability to similar contexts, circumstances, or environmental conditions.

Limitations

Prior to data collection, sampling bias was noted as a potential limitation to this study. Initially, conversation partners were recruited through social service agencies. To address this limitation and cast a wider recruiting net, an article was published in a local community college newspaper, an advertisement was placed in a local university newspaper, and flyers were posted on three college campuses. These expanded

recruitment efforts resulted in a more diverse pool of conversation partners. However, the voices of Asian youths and youths from rural areas are absent from this research.

Access to former street youths is difficult because they are almost impossible to identify once they reconnect with mainstream society. Because this study was qualitative and exploratory in nature, a small sample was deemed methodologically sound and in keeping with similar research. Nevertheless, recruiting efforts for future studies by other means including city newspapers, trade papers, church bulletins, newsletters, and flyers in a wide range of community sites may yield a more diverse sample and reveal additional themes.

Significance

This exploratory study built upon the current literature by identifying and investigating gaps in the way in which research on homeless youths is conceptualized and implemented. The resulting conceptual framework and methodology provides a foundation for future research efforts. In addition, the findings of the research have immediate implications for practice and policy.

Conversation partners' stories revealed an early recognition of feelings of difference and suggest a recurrent interplay between feeling different, seeking connection with others, and being rejected. This cycle may

have played a role in driving them to the outer margins of society. Nonetheless, it appears that it may also have played a role in conversation partners' resilience and their ability to connect with others, which ultimately facilitated their transition off the streets. This is a key finding which warrants further exploration.

This study revealed details and dynamics of transition away from homelessness that have not been previously reported. Contrary to what has been widely reported in the literature, conversation partners were not completely alienated from the mainstream while they were on the streets. Many maintained contact with family members, friends' parents, clergy, and other adults. In addition, a few of them were employed, at least sporadically. Conversation partners' stories revealed that almost all of them utilized both informal and formal sources of support to accomplish the task of transitioning off the streets.

Although it has been documented in the literature that street youths must reach a low point prior to being motivated to transition off the streets, most conversation partners wanted to be off the streets almost from the first moments they found themselves homeless. Barriers to accessing and receiving services prevented them from early transition off the streets.

Two conversation partners, both females who had been in the foster care system, said that the streets had been preferable to their housed living

situations. The fact that these young women chose the streets over being in foster care and were only motivated to leave the streets when they became pregnant suggests that there is something seriously amiss within that system.

This research highlighted an additional explanation for youths living on the streets. As one conversation partner's story revealed, adults who become homeless themselves are often unable to care for their children. This may be due to a variety of reasons. In this instance, it was because of the parent's illness and lack of access to resources. Thus, when the parent became homeless, so did her daughter. Once on the streets, they were forced to take separate paths because the parent was taken to the hospital due to her illness, and the daughter was left behind to fend for herself.

This study also found that the major impediments to transitioning off the streets were physical and psychological barriers. Social service agencies provide a wide array of services. However, conversation partners implied that there are not enough services to meet the diverse needs of all street youths. Furthermore, their stories reveal that there are significant gaps in service delivery. These issues must be addressed, in order that more youths transition off the streets in a smooth, steady, and timely manner.

Finally, the findings suggest that some youths might be prevented from becoming homeless if institutional changes were implemented. In

schools, tracking systems for youths who suddenly stop attending school, or counseling and referrals to outside resources for all youths who need them, might make a difference in the number of youths who find themselves on the streets. In addition, medical personnel might be trained to ask patients who have minor children if they have concerns about care for their children while the patients are receiving services.

In summary, this inquiry provided former street youths--now conversation partners--with the opportunity to gain new personal insights and contribute to the public discourse about the issue of youth homelessness. Each of the 11 young people who participated in the study shared that they hoped that their contribution to this work would make a difference in the lives of other street youths. The findings of this study illuminate the resilience, resourcefulness, and wisdom of young people in extraordinary circumstances and the too often misguided or impotent efforts of the people and institutions on which they rely. We have much to learn by listening to their voices.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Today's youth are among the most highly regulated, undervalued, and often disrespected groups in our society. They are rarely allowed to participate in meaningful ways in society and are often discriminated against. According to Cote and Allahar (1996), young people constitute a class without power, and the medical model has increasingly been used to justify restricting them. Normal behavior is defined in terms of conformity, and rejection of the conditions set out by the status quo is viewed as a sign of maladjustment. The quick fix is the diagnosis of a psychiatric disorder and a prescription for stimulants, anti-depressants, or anti-psychotic drugs.

Referring to the diagnostic categories covering adolescent behavior, Sprinthall and Collins (1984) argue that "the category system [of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual III] is so broad in scope that virtually all aspects of adolescent behavior that can deviate in any way from the normative can be labeled as mental disease" (p. 386). Although some diagnoses may be legitimate and even life-saving, focus on the individual alone may draw attention away from other factors linked to morbidity and mortality in youths, such as inadequate education, underemployment, racism, and declining per-capita resources.

According to Males (1996), the United States Supreme Court rulings on adolescent issues have not been aimed at protecting children. Adolescents have either been deemed "super-adults," subject to the harshest of punishments, or defined as children "restricted by the most primitive shackles, as will yield the most punitive result" (p. 35). Since the late 1970s, the Court has increasingly ruled that juveniles have few, if any, constitutional rights and may be subjected to sterner punishments based on fewer procedural safeguards that those afforded to adults. For example, "In 1989, the Court specifically allowed states to deny juveniles individual rights because of their 'immature age' but to apply 'individualized tests' in order to put them to death" (p. 36). In California, a 1993 study conducted by the Department of Corrections revealed that juveniles were consistently incarcerated for 60 percent longer than adults for the same crimes.

Youths have no formal political power. Their voices are often silenced. As true as this is for youths in general, it is even more so for street youths who are further stigmatized because they are homeless.

The researcher's concern with society's treatment of youth sparked a curiosity about the research on former street youths. It was dismaying to find an extensive, problem-based body of research that used predominantly quantitative methods and documented problems and deficits using what the researcher supposed were pre-existing theories to explain the causes and

consequences of homelessness among youth. The researcher's observations over two decades of raising sons and working as a youth advocate, coupled with training in empowering ecological approaches to community health, suggested to the researcher that there was more to know and understand about this phenomenon. This led to an interest in qualitative research and the ways in which qualitative methods had been utilized to illuminate the experiences of street youths.

Databases Searched

A search of the literature between 1983 and 1999 was conducted using the following keywords: youth, teen, adolescent, homeless, runaway, throwaway, isolation, alienation, stigma, marginalization, rejection, intervention, transition, resilience, and qualitative. The data bases searched were PsycInfo, Sociological Abstracts, CARL UnCover, and Medline. PsycInfo covers psychology and related areas with an emphasis on research literature from 1,443 journals, dissertations, reports, conference proceedings, books, and book chapters. Sociological Abstracts includes articles in sociology and related disciplines, both theoretical and applied, from more than 2,000 journals, dissertations, and other scholarly documents from around the world. CARL UnCover provides access to approximately 17,000 journals in all subject areas. Medline contains articles from more

than 3,800 international journals and covers the fields of medicine, nursing, dentistry, veterinary medicine, and the pre-clinical sciences.

This search resulted in 18 qualitative studies. Due to the small number of articles retrieved, the search was expanded to include quantitative studies. This resulted in an additional 809 articles. Articles selected for intensive review included the following: (a) all of the qualitative studies, (b) quantitative studies that addressed the broad experiences and issues of youth homelessness and alienation, and (c) articles about theories of resilience among youths.

The purpose of this literature review was threefold. First, it was to obtain an understanding of the issues street youths face prior to becoming and during the experience of being homeless. Second, it was to identify the ways in which street youths transition off the streets. Third, it was to explore they ways in which resilience among children and adolescents has been defined.

The review is divided into the following sections: (a) a brief review of qualitative methods, (b) street youths' relationships with other individuals prior to becoming homeless, (c) street youths' experiences on the streets, (d) possible reasons for remaining on the streets, (e) potential barriers to transitioning off the streets, and (f) various factors that may denote resilience and the ways in which resilience has been measured.

Qualitative Methodology

Interviewing, a key resource in qualitative research, provides researchers with access to people's thoughts, ideas, and memories in their own words instead of those of the researcher (Reinharz, 1992). This is particularly important for studies of youths whose ideas have gone unnoticed because adults often either speak for them or ignore them entirely.

A basic premise of phenomenological research is that individuals have no existence apart from the world. Thus, experience and meaning are derived from being in the world. To extract behavior from its context leads to misunderstanding the behavior and giving it a meaning that it does not have (Knaack, 1984). Hence, the meaning of a phenomenon can only be understood by those who directly experience it.

Two of the key assumptions in qualitative methods address the nature of truth (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The first is the belief that truth is subjective, that no single reality exists. Each individual's life experiences, and the way in which they are processed by the individual, act to create a filter through which one views the world. No two individuals have exactly the same filter, thus each will see things from a slightly different perspective.

The second assumption is that truth is relative. Individuals come together and through the process of communication construct the truth. When new information is added, the truth is renegotiated or reconstructed. Because of this belief in the relativity of truth, research must necessarily be collaborative. Imposing a priori ideas may lead to reductionistic thought and deny the experience of others. Thus, qualitative methods allow the researcher to maximize discovery and description and to fully explore the similarities and differences among individuals (Reinharz, 1992).

Relationships and Feelings of Alienation Prior to Leaving Home

Prior to beginning this research, two former street youths had shared with the researcher that they felt different at a very young age and had struggled to fit in with peers as early as elementary school. A review of the selected literature confirmed that this is not an uncommon theme among street youths.

A number of studies have found that street youths experience severe problems in their peer relations prior to becoming homeless. Price (1989) surveyed homeless youth in Boston and found that few street youths responded positively to having had friends in childhood. Those who did have friends as young children rarely reported that the relationships continued into adolescence. Street youths frequently reported being teased and victimized by peers throughout childhood and had a sense of being

apart and different from others, prior to becoming homeless. They often described themselves as having been loners.

Adams, Gullotta, and Clancy (1985) conducted structured interviews of 43 homeless male and female adolescents at the Youth Emergency Service of the YMCA in Hartford, Connecticut. Seeking differences between various types of "runaways" and "throwaways," they found that runaways left home due to family conflict, poor social relations, and alienation. Throwaways were rejected, abandoned, or actively encouraged to leave home. Both runaways and throwaways reported that they experienced severe peer relations problems. When asked if other students included them in activities, street youths reported that they had been infrequently invited to join their peers. Moreover, they indicated that they would have liked to have been included more often.

In addition to reporting feeling rejected by peers, youths report rejection by family and teachers (Brennan et al., 1978). Brennan et al. conducted a quantitative, retrospective study of runaways in seven states across the United States. They distinguished between two types of runaways. Class I runaways, whose behavior may be explained by strain theory, were those who failed to achieve personal needs in the family and consequently ran away as a result of strain in the home. Although they were not considered highly delinquent and alienated, they reported feeling

powerless and socially estranged. Class II runaways' behavior may be explained by control theory. These individuals were said to have a weak commitment to social norms. They were considered highly delinquent, alienated runaways. They reported serious conflicts with parents, feeling rejected, and having serious problems at school. Runaways from both classes experienced a withdrawal of love, remoteness, and disinterest on the part of their parents prior to leaving home. In addition, they experienced a loss of aspiration and involvement at school, academic failure, and perceived denial or access to desirable school roles prior to leaving home.

Life on the Streets

Once they are on the streets, youths are confronted with myriad health and survival issues. Among street youths, there are high rates of substance use and mental health problems, including depression, low self-esteem, suicidality, and self-injurious behavior (Kipke, Montgomery, Simon, & Iverson, 1997; Smart & Walsh, 1993; Unger et al., 1997; Yoder, Hoyt, & Whitbeck, 1998). They frequently report having multiple sex partners, inconsistent condom use, having sex under the influence of alcohol or other drugs, intravenous drug use, and a history of sexually transmitted diseases. Substance use and high risk sexual behaviors increase youths' vulnerability to HIV infection (Clements, Gleghorn, Garcia, Katz, & Marx, 1997; Johnson, Aschkenasy, Herbers, & Gillenwater, 1996; Kral, Molnar,

Booth, & Watters, 1997). Furthermore, street youths are exposed to violence at high rates. Those who have been victimized at home are more likely to be victimized on the streets, and long-term homelessness increases their risk for victimization and perpetrating violence on the streets (Baron & Hartnagel, 1998; Kipke, Simon, Montgomery, Unger, & Iversen, 1997; Terrell, 1997; Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Ackley, 1997a).

Empirical evidence shows that runaways and throwaways are likely to have left homes with high levels of conflict, that these youths have a difficult time bonding emotionally, and that they show signs of being socially isolated (Adams et al., 1985; Hier, Korboot, & Schweitzer, 1990; Ringwalt et al., 1998). Hence, the level of alienation among street youths appears to increase from that which exists prior to being on the streets. Hier et al. (1990) conducted a quantitative survey of adolescents in Australian shelters and found that both male and female runaways and throwaways scored high on measures of social isolation. The researchers argue that the prevalence of social isolation lends support for the theory that these young individuals lack social bonds. They call for further research to obtain a better understanding of the processes that lead to alienation.

Although street youths attempt to create friendships, and many report having close friendships, their sense of alienation remains.

McCarthy and Hagan (1992) conducted an in-depth, descriptive survey with 390 street youths in Toronto and found that 57% of the respondents reported being lonely half of the time, and 29% reported being lonely most of the time. Furthermore, 27% had attempted suicide while on the streets. While the problems of alienation, isolation, and loneliness appear to be fairly well documented, it is unknown what the combined effect of these experiences means to youths.

Noting the paucity of information about street youths' daily lives, experiences, and perceptions, Lundy (1995) conducted a phenomenological and ethnographic study exploring the activities and relationships of a small group of street youths. Her informants told stories of overwhelming loss accompanied by feelings of abandonment and rejection. Some of them reported having no contact with family or having no friends. Furthermore, some informants expressed the feeling that they were not normal with respect to the dominant culture. These feelings reinforced the youths' sense of isolation. This isolation was geographic, temporal, and conceptual as evidenced by the following:

> You don't even want to see the daylight, 'cause there's normal people out there and you just don't want it 'cause you feel like you're not normal....You isolated yourself from the world itself, from the world itself. Yeah, the kids don't feel like they want to be seen by anyone on the outside. (p. 108)

Lundy's (1995) description poignantly depicts the isolation youths experience once they are on the streets. However, the meaning attached to feeling like an outsider prior to becoming homeless and the role that experience may have played in becoming homeless was not examined.

One of Lundy's (1995) informants did transition off the streets. She reports that he was "an attractive and intelligent young man who possessed social savvy, reasonable insight, and a realistic appraisal of his abilities" (p. 177). This informant was able to utilize the social service system and its resources effectively. In addition, he found a benefactor who cared about him. However, the complete process through which this individual reconnected, and what motivated him to do so, is unclear. It is also unknown how he met his benefactor, what his benefactor's specific role was, and if he was successful in remaining off the streets. Finally, the other ways in which youths might accomplish the transition remain unclear.

Reasons They Stay on the Street

Palenski and Launer (1987) reported on a qualitative study that they conducted in the late 1970s. Using a naturalist field method, data were collected through structured and unstructured interviews, participant accounts, and group discussions. Youths were contacted through both runaway shelters and friends who knew they were living away from home. The authors viewed the runaway experience as a social process of action and

reaction that unfolds over time. They reported that family disengagement is a major factor in the process of deciding to run and remain away from home. Youths perceived things as worsening at home and saw no alternatives other than leaving. Once out of the house, youths were confronted with managing the residuals, the process by which runaways give up old concerns regarding family and adopt the concerns of a runaway and ultimately, identify completely with that role. However, if they identify completely with the role of runaway, the process through which they recreate their identity and reconnect with the mainstream to transition off the streets remains unanswered. Moreover, although many street youths run away from home, others are asked or forced to leave their homes. Palenski and Launer's study did not include the latter category of youths.

According to Price (1989), once on the streets, the loneliness, depression, and low self-esteem that youths experience prior to becoming homeless are exacerbated and perpetuated by the violence and betrayal they experience while living on the streets. These experiences act to alienate them further and to diminish any initiative they might have to leave the streets. Price argues that youths must be reached at exactly the point when they are tired of being on the streets. Moreover, she states that only through the development of a therapeutic relationship with a counselor, support, and lengthy follow up that may take years, can street youths

successfully transition off the streets. The perspective of street youths regarding how, or when, that point arises is missing. Furthermore, it is doubtful that this is the only process through which street youths transition off the streets.

In an ethnographic study of street youth in Spokane, Washington, Wilkinson (1988) found that youths who entered street life had been cut off from the primary socialization process with parents or other caretakers at an earlier age than the norm. Hence, they ran away to connect with other youths with whom they created a sense of community. Wilkinson argued that through the process of learning the rules for belonging to a new peer group, runaways become secondarily socialized.

Although they are socialized into street life, Wilkinson (1988) concludes that the street kids of today will become members of the dominant culture tomorrow. However, this assumption is not grounded in data collected from informants, and a gap remains in the knowledge regarding how this metamorphosis occurs. Wilkinson argues that in order to assist street youths in developing the skills required for independent living, inputs must be sought from them about the types of services they need.

Barriers to Transitioning

Even street youths who want to transition into independent living must overcome incredible barriers. Crystal (1986) surveyed 580 older street

youths in shelters in New York City and found that 83% of the respondents expected to live independently. However, they had few of the skills necessary for either economic or residential self-sufficiency. The barriers they faced included: (a) extremely poor educational preparation, (b) inability to qualify for existing job training programs, (c) parenting and childcare issues, and (d) criminal histories.

Lundy (1995) observed a "pervasive spirit of futility and nihilism" in her informants. She labeled this category "Born to Die" (p. 170). This sense of hopelessness manifested itself in a variety of self-destructive behaviors including suicide attempts, reckless sexual activity, sharing needles, and widespread refusal to use condoms. She reported that her informants seemed unable to take control of their circumstances. This perpetuated their isolation and prevented their assimilation into the work world and dominant culture.

In general, alienation, the lack of a sense of belonging, is a major problem for the majority of adolescents living in contemporary American society (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Calabrese, 1987). At some point during development, many young people feel cut off from one of the four worlds of youth – family, friends, school, or work. Although, for most of them, the experience is usually not for long and not from more than one world at a time (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). In contrast, street youths experience

alienation from most, or all, of these worlds simultaneously and prior to becoming homeless. Once on the streets, their experiences lead them to perceive life as unpredictable and threatening. Their locus of control becomes increasingly external--life is something that just happens to them. They learn to expect disappointment, to distrust others, and in time, become detached from their feelings and sense of self (Price, 1989).

Resiliency

Although the researcher did not want to be constrained by pre-existing constructs, the resiliency literature is cited here. Resiliency has traditionally been viewed as an individual's ability to survive and thrive despite negative life events. It has been measured in terms of academic success and the absence of psychological disorder. Many street youths survive. However, due to the risk-taking nature of many of their behaviors, there is a reasonable chance that they would not pass the traditional criteria in order to be considered resilient. It seemed to the researcher that street youths who transition out of homelessness must draw on some inner strength to accomplish the task of transition. Thus, the concept of resilience was used to sensitize the researcher and provided one way to being to think about the strengths of street youths.

Garmezy (1994) defines resilience as the skills, abilities, knowledge, and insight that accumulate over time as people struggle to surmount

adversity and meet challenges. It is an ongoing and developing store of energy that can be used in present struggles. The following factors have been identified as playing a role in increasing resiliency in the face of stressful life events: (a) high IQ, (b) quality of parenting, (c) connection to other competent adults, (d) internal locus of control, and (e) social skills (Garmezy, Masten, & Tellegen, 1984; Luthar, 1991; Masten et al., 1988).

In one of the first studies on resilience in children, Werner and Smith (1982) attempted to identify the protective factors which contribute to resilience in high risk children. These children were categorized as such because, prior to their second birthday, they had encountered four or more of the following risk factors: (a) moderate to severe perinatal stress; (b) chronic poverty; (c) raised by parents with no more than an eighth grade formal education; or (d) lived in a family environment that included discord, divorce, parental alcoholism or mental illness.

Werner and Smith (1982) identified both individual characteristics and environmental factors that played a role in resilience. Individual protective factors included characteristics that elicited positive responses from others such as a high activity level, a low degree of excitability and distress, and a high degree of sociability. In addition, these children sought out novel experiences, asked for help when needed, possessed good problem-solving skills, and used whatever talents they had effectively.

Environmental protective factors included the following: (a) residing in a family with fewer than five children who were each spaced at least two years apart, (b) having the opportunity to develop a close bond with and receive positive attention from at least one caretaker during the first years of life, (c) being able to obtain emotional support from outside the immediate family, and (d) having developed a sense of meaning in life and a belief that they could control their fate.

Werner and Smith (1982) found that high risk children with protective factors who had problems as teens were able to rebound in their twenties. Most teen mothers had gone on for additional schooling and were employed. Seventy-five percent of delinquent youths had managed to avoid arrest once they reached adulthood. Critical turning points included military enlistment, marriage, parenthood, and active participation in a church group.

Much of the research on youth resiliency has measured school-based competence as the outcome. In a cross-sectional study conducted by Luthar (1991), 144 inner city, ninth graders were rated on negative life events and social competence. Negative life events included low socioeconomic status, low maternal education, large family size, membership in a minority group, or the absence of one parent. Social competence was based on grades in school and ratings by teachers and peers.

Social expressiveness and interpersonal skills were determined to be significant buffers against stress. Self-esteem was found to be the primary predictor of differences between groups with well adjusted adolescents having higher self-esteem than resilient adolescents, and resilient adolescents having higher self-esteem than vulnerable adolescents. Having a positive perception and strong feelings of control were found to guard against negative perceptions of daily stressors. Luthar (1991) found that resilient youth who had experienced several negative life events manifested more depression or anxiety than competent youth from low stress backgrounds. He concluded that even when youth appear to be functioning well, they may not be as trouble-free as they seem.

In response to the limitations of viewing school-based competence as the single measure of resilience, Tiet et al. (1998) conducted a multi-site, cross-sectional study identifying the factors that characterize resilience in youth measured by the presence or absence of psychiatric disorder. They found that IQ is a good predictor for adjustment in youth at risk. They concluded that resilient youth tend to live in higher functioning families and receive more guidance and supervision by parents and other adults in the family.

Another approach to understanding resiliency is the Health Realization Model developed by Roger Mills (Saleebey, 1996). The model is

grounded in two key principles. First, resiliency, the capacity for mental health despite exposure to severe risk, is innate in all human beings despite risk factors. Second, resiliency is directly accessible and potentially available at all times. By focusing on their strengths, individuals are reconnected to the health within themselves. This results in change that comes from within rather than being imposed from the outside.

Resiliency in youths of all ages has been studied. However, there is a scarcity of research on resiliency in youths who have experienced the combination of alienation, isolation, and homelessness and have transitioned off the streets into independent, housed living situations.

Summary

In conclusion, researchers have studied runaways, throwaways, sheltered youth, and youth on the streets. Consequently, the causes of youth homelessness, the problems street youths are confronted with, and the barriers they face in their attempts to transition off the streets are well documented. This review of the literature sensitized the researcher to the concepts of alienation, isolation, and identity formation among street youths. However, the researcher was left with four key questions: (a) How did street youths overcome the sense of alienation and isolation they experienced, (b) what was the process through which they reconnected with mainstream society in order to transition off the streets, (c) how did they

create a new identity, and (d) what was the meaning of living these experiences?

A number of researchers have identified the limitations of quantitative methods in understanding the complexities of street youths' experiences and have recommended non-traditional, qualitative research approaches (Lundy, 1995; Palenski & Launer, 1987; Wilkinson, 1988). Studying the experiences of street youths through quantitative research may inadvertently distort given behaviors rather than disclose their full meaning.

At the heart of this work was an exploration of the dual existence of alienation and resilience in street youths in order to illuminate the role they play in homelessness, survival, and transition from the streets. The specific aim of this research was to obtain rich, thick, comprehensive descriptions of these young individuals' lives in order to provide answers to the questions posed by the researcher and fill the gaps in the existing literature.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of street youths who have transitioned from homelessness to independent, domiciled living. By providing opportunities for former street youths to tell their stories in one-to-one, in-depth interviews, this exploratory study examined the process through which youths journey into and through the experience of homelessness and the concomitant feelings of isolation and difference. Most important, it focused on the strengths of these young individuals who have successfully negotiated the process of reconnecting with others in order to transition out of homelessness.

Objectives

1. To document the lived experiences of a previously unacknowledged population.

2. To explore the process through which street youths transition from homelessness to independent, domiciled living.

3. To provide an opportunity for former street youths to participate in public discourse about the issue of homelessness.

4. To provide a foundation for future research efforts that will ultimately inform practice and policy in support of prevention and intervention services and programs that are relevant to youths' lives.

5. To build upon, and contribute to, the existing body of literature about street youths, homelessness, alienation, and resilience.

Definitions

The following definitions were defined prior to commencing inverviews:

"Living on the streets", or "homelessness", was defined as a state in which youths do not rent, own, or have customary and regular access to a conventional dwelling (McCarthy & Hagan, 1992).

Youths are defined in various ways in the literature. Hier et al. (1990) distinguish between "homeless youths"--those who have no home to return to, and "street kids"--those who may have permanent shelter to which they periodically return. Wilkinson (1988) defines "street kids" as youths as young as 10 or 11 and as old as 22, who spend most of their waking hours in areas frequented by other street kids and who engage in street activities whether or not the youths are actually homeless. Since the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of individuals whose primary place of residence and activity for some period of time while between the ages of 10 and 22 was on the streets, the term "street youths" was used.

"Legally emancipated minors" are youths under the age of 18 years who are self-supporting and who have been formally released by the court from the custody of their parents or other guardians.

"Street" was defined in the broadest sense and included unoccupied dwellings, squats, areas under bridges, creek beds, empty lots, train or bus stations, beaches, parks, abandoned cars, motel rooms, shelters, and "couch-surfing" from one residence to another.

"Transitioned" was defined as the process whereby street youths reconnected with mainstream society and became able to support themselves in domiciled living situations such as rented rooms, condominiums, or apartments.

"Independent" was defined as being at least 18 years of age or legally emancipated, employed, and not relying on family; friends; shelter services, including transitional housing; or group homes for assistance.

Research Design

This study used a qualitative design specifically employing phenomenological methods. In phenomenological research, data are collected primarily through the telling of autobiographical stories. Those providing information are treated like equal partners, often guiding the process in directions of their choice. Thus, the interview becomes a cooperative experience in which both the interviewer and the interviewee

work towards the shared goal of understanding. The interviewee in this type of research may be described as a conversation partner (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

In this research, autobiographical accounts of former street youths were audiotaped during in-depth, one-to-one interviews. Each conversation partner was viewed as a unique individual with his or her own concerns, interests, and ways of interacting with the researcher.

Conceptual Framework

The ways of thinking about this work began with the lived experience of the researcher. An extensive review of the literature from diverse fields (see chapter 2) and several events during the pre-research year further informed this study.

The pain of loving and raising a child only to watch him spiral downward through a labyrinth of self-destructive behavior and knowing that you are a powerless witness to the outcome defies description. The researcher's son inhabited a world marked by hunger, drugs, crime, violence, and homelessness. Although the researcher sought interventions from various institutions, including medical, school, and legal, none of these were able to respond effectively. When he finally found his path away from street life, the researcher was left wondering about the emptiness and alienation he had experienced and the inner resilience that enabled him to

turn his life around. The researcher had three burning questions: (a) What prompts street youths to change, (b) what is the source of their resilience, and (c) how do they reconnect with the mainstream?

There were several events which happened during the pre-research year that informed the study and conceptual framework. Two of these were incidents which occurred shortly after the shocking, highly publicized, 1999 shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. First, in response to the way the shootings were being framed in the media (see Appendix A), the researcher wrote a letter to the editor of a local newspaper. In the letter, the researcher addressed the issues of youths feeling disenfranchised and powerless to change their situation. The researcher stated that this sometimes leads youths to respond in a variety of self-destructive ways. When the researcher shared the letter with colleagues, a young, male colleague replied that this insight into and understanding of issues that youths face was on track and resonated with his personal experiences. He shared that he always felt like an outsider when he was growing up because he was not involved in sports, and academic achievements were not valued in the same way they are today. He stated that he had a very painful youth, and although he did not become a street youth, he struggled in other ways.

The second incident was a conversation with a small group of 17 and 18 year old males who shared that although they would not resort to violence that extreme, they certainly understood the young males' behavior in Littleton. Based on their own high school experiences, they believed these young men felt like outsiders. These young males had been involved in a variety of illegal activities, and some of them were street youths, at the time of our conversation.

The third incident was an informal conversation with a young man who had been through the experience of homelessness and had successfully transitioned off the streets. He spoke of never fitting in at school and having "no sense of self." He described seeking out others who were "empty on the inside", being "sucked down", and losing all "caring, love, and feelings." A female, former street youth confirmed these feelings of difference, and both former street youths stated that it was extremely difficult to "get out" of that life.

Throughout each of these experiences, first, as the mother of a homeless youth, then, the conversation with my colleague, and finally, the conversations with young male teens and former street youths, a consistent theme began to emerge. Feeling different appeared to cross boundaries and was somehow a part of the experience of people who were living close to the edge in a variety of ways. The questions that remained to be answered

were: 1) what does it mean to experience feeling different, 2) how do these individuals reconnect, and 3) is there something about each individual that enhances their chance of reconnecting?

Assumptions

The following assumptions formed the basis of this research:

1. Former street youths have an inner core of strength that facilitates their survival on and their ability to transition from the streets.

2. Former street youths have insider knowledge that is useful for planning services for homeless youths.

3. Former street youths would become true conversation partners and participate equally in the construction of the "truth."

4. Conversation partners would be able to overcome the potential differences in age, sex, race, class, and sexual orientation between themselves and the researcher and be willing to share their stories.

5. Conversation partners would be truthful in their storytelling.

6. The researcher would be able to interview at least ten conversation partners.

7. The researcher would be able to create an environment conducive to trust and sharing.

8. The researcher would be able to listen and elicit the essence of the

stories with the insights of the mother of a former street youth and analyze the data with the rigor of a researcher.

9. Agencies would be willing and able to assist with recruiting former street youths.

10. The information gathered would be the starting point for further research that would ultimately be used to inform practice and policy.

Sample Selection

In a phenomenological study, participants must either be living, or have lived, the experience in which the researcher is interested. The number of conversation partners is not as important as is the selection of individuals who have the potential for illuminating a particular experience. It is more important that the researcher has adequate opportunities to explore the phenomena of interest in depth (DePoy & Gitlin, 1998; LoBiondo-Wood & Haber, 1998).

Eleven former street youths, at least 18 years of age or legally emancipated minors; currently employed; living independently in their own home, condominium, apartment, or rented room; and not receiving support from social service agencies were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Initial interviews sought to include individuals who had been on the streets as youths and who had successfully transitioned into independent housed living. Later sampling was designed to illuminate

the experiences of individuals who had been on the streets as youths and who had successfully transitioned off the streets without the assistance of social service agencies.

Four directors at youth service agencies in Northern California were contacted by phone, told about the research, and asked to assist in recruiting former homeless youths. Two of the agencies, the Bill Wilson Center and the Emergency Housing Consortium, are located in an urban area within Santa Clara County. The third, Larkin Street Center for Youth, is located in the city of San Francisco. The fourth, the Homeless Emergency Runaway Effort Program (HERE), is situated within the Department of Mental Health in rural Butte County. Approval from San Jose State University Human-Subjects-Institutional Review Board was obtained before recruitment commenced and data were collected (see Appendix B).

Agency representatives initiated contact with potential conversation partners, provided them with contact information for the researcher, and obtained permission to provide their contact information to the researcher. Agency representatives then contacted the researcher and provided conversation partners' names and phone numbers, if the conversation partner had given them permission to do so. The researcher either called the potential conversation partner or waited for the conversation partner to contact her. Once contact was made, the researcher ensured that the

potential conversation partner met the inclusion criteria and was interested in and willing to be interviewed, answered questions about the research, and arranged the meeting date, time, and place. Follow-up phone calls were made to the conversation partners prior to the scheduled meeting dates to confirm meetings.

The researcher wanted to be as accessible by phone as possible to potential conversation partners, so an existing phone line was dedicated for this purpose. The researcher initially considered giving out the unlisted home phone number. However, there were concerns about completely relinquishing privacy, maintaining a boundary between public work and private life, and remaining accessible after completion of the study. Options considered included: (a) obtaining a separate phone line for a year; (b) obtaining an 800 number, so that out-of-area youth would not incur phone charges and would therefore be more likely to call; or (c) both a and b. Ultimately, the researcher's fax machine was disconnected for a year, and a phone and answering machine were connected to that line. Collect calls were accepted. If an out-of-area call was intercepted by the researcher, an offer to immediately return the call was made, so the caller could minimize phone charges.

As the research progressed, a variety of efforts was made to cast as wide a recruiting net as possible. Some of these efforts resulted in increased

contacts with conversation partners, and others were dead-ends. The editors of two local community colleges were contacted and asked to publish an article on homeless youth which included the researcher's contact information. One of them agreed to do so. In addition, a recruitment advertisement was placed in a local university newspaper, and flyers were posted on all three campuses.

These efforts resulted in a diverse group of conversation partners in terms of race, gender, and sexual identity. However, the voices of Asian youths and youths from rural areas are absent from this research.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was emphasized to each conversation partner. The researcher explained the purpose of the research, answered questions posed by the conversation partner, and provided him or her with the opportunity to select a pseudonym in order to protect confidentiality. The researcher explained that participation was completely voluntary, that the conversation partner could refuse to answer any questions, stop the interview at any time, or both. Furthermore, each conversation partner was told that his or her withdrawal or refusal to participate would not affect any future services he or she might receive from the agency through which he or she was recruited.

Potential personal risks and benefits were explained to conversation partners. Each partner was informed that he or she would be asked to recall information about his or her past that might be uncomfortable. In addition, each partner was informed that he or she might benefit by seeing his or her experiences in new ways and possibly gaining new insight into his or her strengths and capabilities.

Permission was obtained to audiotape the interview. Conversation partners were told that the results would be published in aggregate form and that pseudonyms, not given names, would be linked to quotes. Each conversation partner was provided with two informed participation forms, previously signed by the researcher, with the study details outlined (see Appendix C). He or she was asked to keep one copy for his or her records and to sign and return the other to the researcher, prior to commencing the interview. Each conversation partner received $25.00 in appreciation of the time and knowledge he or she shared with the researcher. Each conversation partner was given a thank you note. The researcher's phone number was provided, in case the conversation partner had any questions or concerns after the interview was concluded.

Data Collection Methods, Instruments, and Storage

Although the questions asked during the interviews evolved over time, initially, there were four main, open-ended questions designed by the

researcher. They addressed the conversation partner's experience with others prior to becoming homeless and during his or her homeless experience, the process through which the conversation partner became homeless, and the process through which he or she transitioned off the streets (see Appendix D).

A pilot interview using the initial questions was conducted with a key informant who was also a former street youth. It was concluded that the questions were sufficiently open to evoke feelings and reveal personal experiences, yet appropriately sensitive to allow conversation partners to respond at the emotional level at which they were comfortable.

Audiotaped interviews took place in private, either in conversation partners' homes, a private upstairs room in a coffee house, a faculty member's office at San Jose State University, or a classroom at the same University, between August 1999 and January 2000. The researcher opened with a question that asked conversation partners to describe their experience growing up prior to becoming homeless. Although the conversation partners were free to guide the course of the interview, each was asked, at some point, to describe his or her experiences with family, peers, school, and other adults prior to homelessness, while he or she was homeless, and after homelessness. In addition, each was asked to describe how it felt to be homeless and about the process through which he or she

transitioned off the streets. Two additional categories developed during early interviews, and questions about the meaning of home and personal, private space were added.

Interviews ranged from one and one-half hours to four hours in length. After the interview, the researcher suggested that conversation partners contact the researcher if they had questions, wanted additional information, or had concerns regarding the interview. Permission to contact the conversation partners for follow-up, if necessary, was obtained. Immediately after each interview, the researcher made field notes on the process, impressions of the conversation partner, and reactions to the interview and conversation partner.

Interviews were taped using a Sony Clear Voice microcassette recorder (M-830V) and a Sony remote microphone (ECM-R100). They were transcribed using a Sony microcassette transcriber (M-2000). Tapes and interviews were identified using first names only. Interviews were stored on floppy disks. Tapes, disks, and all other related notes and materials were kept in a locked desk drawer in the researcher's office. All identifying information was deleted at the conclusion of this research.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and reviewed to detect any errors or omissions that might have occurred during transcription. Analysis

began during the transcription process as the researcher became immersed in the data. Common themes, differences, and new issues were noted. Categories were created for each recurrent topic. These original categories were used as the basis for analyzing new data which was either classified into an existing category or used to modify or create new categories. Relationships among and between categories were explored and analyzed in order to identify underlying themes. Themes were used to provide rich, thick, descriptions of the lived experiences of conversation partners (DePoy & Gitlin, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of qualitative research may be judged by its credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility refers to the confidence one can have in the truth of the results. It was established through the use of peer debriefings and member checks.

Peer debriefings were accomplished by sharing the data and ongoing data analysis with the researcher's thesis advisor. Member checks involved conversation partners who were asked to provide feedback at periodic intervals during data analysis, interpretation, and the formulation of conclusions. This was done in three ways: (a) At the end of each conversation, the researcher asked conversation partners questions as a

check-in and to clarify anything that seemed ambiguous; (b) emergent concepts and themes were shared with later conversation partners; and (c) two conversation partners were asked to review the final set of concepts identified by the researcher. These methods served to ensure that the essence of the experiences of all conversation partners was accurately and adequately described.

Dependability refers to the stability of findings over time, and confirmability refers to the objectivity of the data. These were accomplished through the use of an audit trail. In addition, all decisions regarding the creation of categories and themes were documented at each step during data analysis. Intersubjective agreement between the researcher and an independent judge was achieved at each step of data analysis. The independent judge coded 10% of the data, and comparisons between the researcher's and the judge's codes were made. An agreement rate of 86% was reached with 85% being considered very good for coding purposes (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991).

Transferability refers to whether the findings can be transferred to similar contexts or situations and still preserve the meanings, interpretations, and inferences of the research. The goal of qualitative research is to produce in-depth understandings and knowledge of particular phenomena (Leininger, 1994). This was accomplished by providing the

widest range of rich, thick descriptions from which someone interested in making a transfer could reach their own conclusion about its applicability to similar contexts, circumstances, or environmental conditions.

Chapter 4

Results

This chapter describes the results of the recruitment, characteristics of the conversation partners, and themes that emerged through analysis of the interview data. Representative quotes are used to support each theme. The themes were created by the researcher and validated by two of the conversation partners as indicated in chapter 3. Trustworthiness of the findings was accomplished through the use of an audit trail. In addition, ten percent of the data was coded by an independent judge. An intersubjective agreement rate of 86% between the researcher and the independent judge was reached with 85% being considered very good for coding purposes (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991).

Recruitment

Recruitment was initiated through two San Jose social service agencies that were contacted in May 1999. Recruitment commenced in July 1999, and five conversation partners were located through the assistance of one of the agencies. In August 1999, a potential conversation partner was located through a social service agency in Butte County; however, the researcher did not meet with that individual. In order to cast as wide a recruiting net as possible, between October and November 1999, an article requesting participation was published in a local community college

newspaper and an advertisement was placed in the newspaper of a large university. Two more conversation partners responded to the advertisement in the university paper. In December 1999, two additional conversation partners were recruited through the assistance of a San Francisco social service agency. Two other potential conversation partners were known to the researcher.

These methods resulted in 12 contacts of which 11 were completed to interview. Interviews took place between August 1999 and January 2000. Recruiting efforts ceased at this point due to the overall project timeline and the emergence of consistent themes in completed interviews.

Conversation Partners

Although all conversation partners were given the option of choosing a pseudonym prior to the commencement of interviews, only three did so. Most expressed the desire to be known to the researcher by their given name. They further shared that they were not ashamed of their experiences and wanted their stories to be heard. However, some of them were concerned about the potential consequences that might arise as a result of their name being linked to specific activities described during the interviews. In order to encourage openness and honesty, each was assured that his or her identity would be held in the strictest confidence and would not be linked to specific quotes. Thus, conversation partners who did not

choose their own pseudonym were assigned one by the researcher for reporting purposes.

Demographic data were collected and included self-reported information about age, sex, sexual identity, and race or ethnicity. The results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Conversation Partner Characteristics

ID code	Age	Sex	Sexual identity	Race/Ethnicity
Mandy	19	Female	Heterosexual	Mexican/Hawaiian/White
Ed	19	Male	Heterosexual	Italian/Mexican
Bonnie	19	Female	Heterosexual	Portuguese
Terry	19	Female	Heterosexual	Caucasian
Jeff	20	Male	Heterosexual	Caucasian
Cara	20	Female	Heterosexual	Caucasian
Paul	21	Male	Heterosexual	Caucasian
Randy	21	Male	Gay	Caucasian
Mary	21	Female	Lesbian	Black/White
Lynn	25	Female	Heterosexual	Native American
Claudia	31	Female	Lesbian	Caucasian

Overview of Conversation Partners

The conversation partners interviewed were very diverse. They came from a wide geographic range and described a variety of living situations and parenting arrangements. Moreover, conversation partners' educational experiences and involvement in extracurricular activities differed. The results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Conversation Partners' Housing, Education, and Extracurricular Activities

ID Code	City Raised In	Lived With	High School	College	Extracurricular Activities
Mandy	San Jose	Foster Care	None	X[e]	Sports & cheerleader
Ed	San Jose	Multi-relatives[a]	GED		
Bonnie	San Jose	Foster Care	GED		Peer Counselor
Terry	Santa Cruz and Grass Valley	Multi-relatives[a]	Diploma; Public	X[e]	
Jeff	Multi-locations[b]	Father and Stepmother	Diploma; ISP[d]		

(table continues)

ID Code	City Raised In	Lived With	High School	College	Extracurricular Activities
Cara	Sunnyvale	Biological Parents	Diploma; Public		
Paul	Saratoga	Mother and Stepfather	Diploma; Private		Sports and Jr. Counselor at. summer camp
Randy	Hayward	Multi-relatives[a]	Diploma; Public		
Mary	Santa Clara	Mother	GED	X[e]	Music
Lynn	San Ramon	Adoptive Parents	GED		
Claudia[c]	Multi-locations[b]	Legal Guardian	Diploma; Public	X[e]	Sports and Peer Counselor

[a] This refers to living with grandparents and aunts and uncles.
[b] This refers to living in States other than California, out of the United States, or both.
[c] Religion was an important part of conversations partners' upbringing.
[d] Independent Study Program
[e] This indicates some college

Conversation partners first appeared on the streets at different ages and reported a variety of events that led to the incident. Most conversation

partners utilized a variety of services provided by agencies in order to transition off the streets.

Parents. Conversation partners' parents were extremely diverse in terms of education, parenting behavior, and drug use. Four conversation partners said that their parents had college degrees. One of those conversation partners stated that his parents had advanced college degrees. The range of education for the seven remaining conversation partners' parents was some college, to high school graduate, to high school dropout.

Four conversation partners revealed that they had been abused in their homes. Bonnie said that she had been physically abused by both her mother and older brother. She shared that she had also been sexually abused by her father. Jeff said that he had been verbally and physically abused by his father. Randy and Terry said that their abuse, both physical and sexual, had been at the hands of their mothers' boyfriends.

Five conversation partners stated that their parents were involved in substance misuse. The misuse ranged from drinking heavily, to using drugs frequently, to being strung out on drugs. Mandy had been placed in foster care because of this behavior on her mother's part.

On The Streets. The ages at which conversation partners were first on the streets ranged from 12 years to 18 years. The length of time they were on the streets varied from four months to four years. Ten conversation

partners spoke about a slow, progressive process that led up to being on the streets.

Bonnie and Mandy had been in foster care and had been moved between numerous group and foster homes over a period of years. Each time, they had to change schools and leave friends behind. They said that they went to the streets because they did not want to live in a system where no one cared about them.

Three other conversation partners had parents who were involved in illegal substance use. Terry and Randy shared that they grew tired of attempting to cope with the endless stream of men in their mothers' lives and the abuse that was inflicted upon them. Ed was nine years old when he lost his father to a drug overdose. His mother was "strung out" on drugs, and he stated that the entire family was involved in drugs. According to Ed, the only family member who was not involved in illicit drugs was his grandmother. However, her resources were limited, and she had so many grandchildren to care for that she was forced to turn the older ones out onto the streets.

Five additional conversation partners had struggled in school and at home for a number of years. Lynn, Cara, Jeff, and Paul had received counseling from private practitioners. Cara and Paul had been through drug rehabilitation programs prior to being on the streets. Both of them

stated that when their parents found more drugs in their possession, they were given an ultimatum to either obtain further assistance to straighten out or to leave the family home. They both chose to leave home. Lynn and Jeff shared that they grew tired of hassles with parents. Lynn was in and out of the house over a period of years before she finally stopped going home and stayed on the streets. Jeff was in and out of the house also. He stated that sometimes his father would throw him out and other times he chose to leave. Claudia was told that she was no longer welcome in the family home.

Only one conversation partner experienced a sudden series of events that led to her being on the street. Mary and her brother lived with their single mother. When their mother lost her job, she could not afford their rent, and they were evicted from their townhome. They had nowhere to go, so they were living in their car. Their mother, who was a diabetic, went into insulin shock, and the conversation partner had to call 911 to obtain emergency assistance. After doing so, Mary said that she knew that she could not stay there. She walked to a phone booth and located services for homeless youths in the phone book.

Utilization of Social Services. Eight of eleven conversation partners utilized social service agencies' assistance in order to transition off the streets. The services used included the following: (a) drop-in centers for meals and showers, (b) youth homeless shelters, (c) shelters for pregnant

teenagers, (d) case management services, (e) employment training programs, (f) living skills programs, (g) counseling, and (h) transitional housing programs. Ten of eleven conversation partners relied on informal sources of support including friends and clergy.

At the time of the interviews, all conversation partners were in their own place of residence. This was defined as having signed a rental agreement, paying rent, or receiving a room in exchange for service to their country, that is, enlisted in the military. Conversation partners had been off the streets and living in their own place of residence between 2 months and 12 years.

Core Categories & Themes

All conversation partners appeared very open and expressed an eagerness to share their stories in the hope that they might benefit other street youths. Paul shared that he hoped "that all this time we're putting into it, you, and I, and all the other people [conversation partners], that this information will be used to help other people that are out there on the streets, that are in trouble." He added that street kids need "to be able to come into the light" and that the "light's gotta [sic] be there for them to come into." When asked what he meant, Paul stated that "these people [street youths] just want someone to listen more than anything. Just be there and listen." These are their voices.

Five main coded categories were created after all of the interviews were completed. They include: (a) Before the Streets, (b) On the Streets, (c) Transition, (d) What Kids Need, and (e) After the Streets. Within each category, there are a number of distinct themes. Each category and theme is described below.

Before the Streets

This category refers to the time during which conversation partners were residing with parents or guardians prior to becoming street youths. Five distinct themes emerged within this category and included: (a) Feeling Different, (b) Seeking Connection, (c) Taking Care of Things, (d) Control, and (e) Independent Spirit. Each of these themes is defined below.

Feeling Different. This theme refers to a sense of not being like or not fitting in with other individuals of the same age. Almost all conversation partners talked about feeling different from others. Claudia referred to it as not being connected, "I really struggled in school....I wasn't connected to anybody, really." Lynn described it as being "kind of an outcast." Paul stated that he always felt "like a square peg trying to be in a circle" when he was at school. No matter how they described it, conversation partners shared an early recognition of difference. This is revealed in the following quote from Randy:

> There was [sic] a lot of points in my childhood where I did some very strange things. I had this feeling of not fitting in....It didn't start in

> high school at all. I remember being very young and feeling very different.

The sense of not fitting in had various effects. For some, it resulted in feelings of pain and loneliness which they responded to in various ways. Bonnie shared, "I was so hurt....I would try to take the pain away [by] physically hurt[ing] myself." Paul said,

> When I was in fifth or sixth grade, I remember coming home a lot of days very upset. Crying because of the fact that, you know, ...you were able to hang out with them [other kids], but you weren't really on the in with them. So, they sort of treated you like you were a friend, but then they would stab you in the back, you know, all the time.

For other conversation partners, a sense of hopelessness and worthlessness developed. This was evident in Lynn's story, "I just felt like less than, like I really wasn't worth it, like I really wasn't worth anything. At a very young age, I started questioning my existence. You know, should I even really be here?"

For most conversation partners, the sense of difference resulted in feelings of anger. Lynn recounted fantasies of revenge, "I'd come home from school and at night, before I'd be in bed, I'd just be imagining these horrible things over, I mean, incredibly, just like the things that kids are doing nowadays, these things like Columbine High School."

The issues of difference and fitting in became even more pronounced in high school and were especially difficult for conversation partners who were outside of the dominant culture. Mary shared the following:

> In high school and most of my life, I never really had a lot of Black friends because they all thought that I was some little, light skinned bitch. If you were like, too light, you were not cool....They think we're like privileged or something because we have a White mother. That doesn't mean shit. That doesn't mean anything!

Randy spoke about the stigma attached to being gay and the difficulties of being out in high school. He shared,

> I was uh, I was persecuted a lot for being gay. I was actually accidentally outed at my school. Everyone knew that I was this big, like weird guy 'cause I was gay, you know? It was crap! I had some really good friends, but when it came down to it, you know, I was still gay, and they weren't about to step in.

As revealed in each of the above quotes, conversation partners responded in various ways to feelings of difference. Although this experience may have been extremely difficult for many of them, the next theme illustrates the ways in which conversation partners connected with peers.

Seeking Connection. This theme relates to the pursuit of emotional support and acceptance by peers. All conversation partners sought connections beginning in elementary school. Most of them had not been able to forge relationships easily. Hence, they gravitated toward individuals who would accept them. Lynn shared the following:

> I'm starting to learn about these other kids who've got problems, and we get along....We've all got something in common, 'cause we all hate the world....You know, they were my kind of friends, and people who understood me, and we cared about each other. We became like a, like a family.

In high school, perceptions of difference and the issue of acceptance became even more acute, and conversation partners sought ways to be included. Paul maintained that, as they reach this point in life, many young men are afraid of failure and not fitting in. He said,

> It's the fear of becoming like an adult...and the whole fear factor of girls, and your body changing, and am I going to be accepted? Am I in the in-crowd? It's all about fitting in...because the high school scene is black and white. You know, there's that small little margin [of acceptance]...and then, there's the oddballs like myself that just don't quite fit into that main circulation. You know, that mainstream....We tried to fit in, but sometimes, you know, I think what attracts you [to others] is that you have a whole bunch of people that are like you...and you tend to...meet each other because you don't have much in common with the rest of the group....You know, and drugs are starting to come around, cigarettes, and drinking, and sex....You get into that scene, you know. You all have something in common, and the thing in common is not fitting in with the mainstream.

When avenues for relationships were cut off with both adults and peers, conversation partners shared that they pursued relationships elsewhere. In at least one conversation partner's experience, this led to involvement in gangs. She said,

> I never went with like what was popular, like wearing [particular clothes] and stuff. They [other girls] were all like, "Oh, we're going to high school, we have to look so good" and all this. Fuck these people. I don't care what they say [about] what I wear. Well, who are them [sic] to me? They're, you know. So, I started kicking it with other people, and I liked them a lot better. Kind of like, both my brothers were in gangs, too. So, I was already in the mix with all that.

The previous two themes, Feeling Different and Seeking Connection, portray conversation partners as vulnerable and weak characters.

However, as revealed in the next two themes, conversation partners also possessed an underlying sense of independence and determination.

Taking Care of Things. This theme deals with children performing adult activities. Most conversation partners spoke about having to take care of themselves prior to adolescence. Randy stated,

> I've had to fend for myself a lot. You know, I mean since I was very young. I was kind of, I mean [sigh], I don't know. It was always the next thing. You know, I had to do it, and it just, it was that, I mean it, for so long [italics added], I lived my life like that. If it's got to be done, you've got to do it.

Conversation partners provided examples of the duties for which they were responsible. Bonnie spoke about cooking for the family and watching younger siblings overnight. She shared,

> I mean, my mom, she would come home at four o'clock in the morning, [after] going to clubs and stuff, and you know, she didn't think that we knew that she did, but we knew she did. So, it's all pretty, pretty hard, I guess. I had to pretty much be the mother because my [older] brother would never cook, and me and my [younger] sister really like supported each other through it all.

Claudia's experience of being required to contribute to the family income is revealed in the following:

> I've worked since I was 12....You know, we were expected, one of the things that we were expected to do in my guardian home was that any money we earned, we had to give a portion of it to the house as our contribution. So, so, I've been paying rent, you know, in some form or another, since I was about 15, actually, even earlier than that.

Many conversation partners had to assume adult roles prior to becoming adolescents. As the next theme reveals, many conversation partners also possessed an inner source of strength.

Independent Spirit. This theme was defined as character strength, perseverance, and willingness to take risks. All of the conversation partners told stories that exposed character strength first exhibited in the early years. Paul shared,

> I guess I'm mentally strong...because I'm one of those people that'll be doing something, and I will just get up one day and say, "No More!" I think I've always been like that ever since I was a kid....I'm just one of those people, when I, when I put my mind to something, I just, you know, if I can lock my mind on something, there's nothing that'll stop me. Nothing.

Ed spoke of a strong sense of determination in dealing with difficult situations. He said,

> My family, in general, they all had problems with drugs, and, like I said, when I was nine, I was young, I was at a young age when my dad had [sic] died. That's a big, that's a big thing that kids can go in. [sic] My dad died when I was young, and he died because of drugs....I promised myself, never, never am I going to do drugs...'cause my mom's like that....You know, she'll eventually die 'cause of the stuff....So, if anybody in my family's going to make it, maybe it'll be me....I see an opportunity, it's going to benefit me, boom, take it....If it's something I want to do, then do it.

Randy disclosed a willingness to challenge authority. He stated,

> Between the faculty and the administration, I was a bone of contention, too. I raised so much hell in that school. I mean, I would get there really early and plaster like anti-homophobic propaganda all over the place....I mean the faculty and administration in this place

> was like butting heads all the time, and here I was, right in the middle, poking every chance I got.

Some conversation partners shared that they were left with no choice other than to challenge authority. Mandy said,

> Yeah, well that's all I had was [sic] my friends. So, I really didn't care about anybody else's, what anybody else had to say. My friends were my family. We had a whole group of friends that, we all grew up together....We all went to the same group homes. They even tried to put us in separate cities....Yeah, because we used to get in a lot of trouble together, and so they tried to separate us, and within a month, we were all back. You can't separate good friends like that.

Closely related to the previous two themes, Taking Care of Things and Independent Spirit, was the next theme, Control.

Control. This was defined as rebellious or other forms of activity that might be perceived negatively by authority figures. All conversation partners shared stories that revealed the need to have a sense of control in their lives. The following quote from Cara highlights this need with respect to interpersonal relationships:

> A lot of people don't like going home and, like because a lot of people get, you know, fucked up now. They get so messed up, they don't want to go home, and like face their parents, or something. You know, it could be about that. It could be about they just don't want to go home because of the way their parents are, like maybe they're abusive. Maybe they drink too much. They just don't want to be in that. Maybe they just feel good around their friends. They don't feel good around anybody else they live with. You know, it's about that kind of stuff. You know, feeling, I don't know, kind of in control of your own life when you're all by yourself, I guess.

Some conversation partners spoke about actions as a response to the way they felt treated within systems. Paul said,

> I was always real good verbally, and at manipulating systems, and manipulating people. I think I really used that a lot, and I don't know if it was necessarily manipulation, but yeah, I'm going to call it manipulation. I did. I manipulated the system just like they manipulated me.

As revealed in the themes above, there were many complex and seemingly opposing dynamics occurring in the lives of conversation partners prior to their lives on the streets. In the theme Feeling Different, there is evidence that conversation partners struggled with feelings of difference and felt like outsiders. However, the theme Seeking Connection illustrates their desire and quest to develop relationships in any way possible. In spite of the appearance of vulnerability, conversation partners exhibited strength and independence as revealed in the themes Taking Care of Things, Independent Spirit, and Control. In the next category, specific aspects of conversation partners' lives on the streets are illuminated.

<u>On the Streets</u>

This category was defined as the time during which conversation partners resided in unoccupied dwellings, squats, creek beds, empty lots, train or bus stations, beaches, parks, abandoned cars, motel rooms, shelters, areas under bridges, and "couch-surfed" from one residence to another.

Three themes emerged within this category: (a) Space, (b) Coping, and (c) How it Felt. Each theme is defined below.

Space. This was defined as a place to go in order to retreat from the world. It encompassed both physical and psychological dimensions. The importance of having a place to call one's own was a consistent theme among many conversation partners. Claudia shared, "It's really hard, I mean, even in shelters... [because] your space is not your own." She went on to say that space is something that "people really take for granted when [they] have it" and that "it's not a given. When you see people like out on the street, you know, with everything they own, you know, it's like, where's their space that's just theirs."

Personal space was considered so important that it was perceived as worth fighting for, yet not easily attainable. Paul shared,

> You know, on the streets, there are no boundaries. There are no walls. You don't really have any out there. You know, you have to make your own boundaries. You know, and that's when it gets violent, and it gets ugly, and you get into all that situation. You know, and it just leads, that's just, it's a lost cause. You're fighting for something that's just, you're going to be fighting for the rest of your life.

As important as it was to have physical space to call one's own, some conversation partners also shared that they felt space was important on a psychological level. Claudia said, "I think it's really emotionally important for people to be able to have places where they can go that's theirs, internally or externally, you know. I think on some levels, you need both."

Attempts to endure street life and the lack of a haven from it resulted in a variety of behaviors that are illuminated in the next theme.

Coping. This theme was defined as the methods utilized by conversation partners to deal with living on the streets. Some of them used alcohol and other substances to cope with the emotional pain they felt. Claudia said,

> You know, I, I was pretty much, I couldn't deal. I pretty much left the scene, you know, emotionally. Like I drank really heavily during that time. I did anything to not be present with, with [sigh] what was happening because it was really hard.

However, not all conversation partners used substances to cope with emotional pain. Some of them had never used substances prior to living of the streets and indulged in them as a way to relieve the monotony of street life. Mary shared,

> I had never smoked a cigarette. I had never drank [sic]. I never did anything. It just never, you know, it just never, never interested me. So, but when you're bored, and you don't have anything to do, and you [sic] got a lot on your mind, and what else is there to do? You do it.

Other conversation partners employed alternative methods for coping. These included artistic expressions such as journal writing and creating poetry. Mandy shared the following: "I write poems and stuff. So, any time I would just get like down, it wasn't very often, I would just write maybe a poem, or two, and then I'd be all right."

Just as there were distinct ways of coping with the experience of living on the streets, conversation partners' perceptions of street life varied. The following theme highlights these differences.

How It Felt. This theme was defined as the meanings conversation partners attached to living on the streets. For most conversation partners, the experience of living on the streets was viewed negatively. Many conversation partners were able to share their feelings about the experience of homelessness. Cara said, "It made me feel awful....I mean, it meant like I couldn't take care of myself....I felt worthless and empty." Terry described it in the following way, "It felt like I was a loser....It felt like there was no place I fit in." Claudia shared, "I was really depressed. It was really, it was a very difficult time." Other conversation partners shared that they had buried their feelings but were still able to express their thoughts about the issue. Paul shared the following:

> It was degrading....It sucks! I don't really know. I don't really know how to put it into words. I mean, it's an experience that I don't think anyone should have to go through....I don't really know how to put it into feelings. I really, I mean 'cause I muffled all my feelings anyway.

In addition to sharing their feelings about the experience of living on the streets, a few conversation partners spoke about the meaning of the experience of substance misuse while they were on the streets. Paul said,

> [You] hang with these people who're empty inside, and it sucks you down. You lose all caring, love, all feelings. You're black on the inside. You have no sense of self, no self-worth. You don't care about

> what happens to you, and the more you do drugs, the more it pulls you away from yourself. It's not a conscious thing. It's not about "Just Say No."

Randy described his experience in the following way:

> It was, it was like someone could yell down my throat, and it would echo all the way down to my toes. You know, it was the absence of anything. You know, and that's what was so scary. It was like this complete vapidness [sic]. You know, like complete shallowness and not necessarily a shallow character or lack of spirit. It was just like [sigh], I didn't even know what it was. It was just this [pause], I can't even describe it. It was just like nothing. You know, it was like feeling nothing, and thinking nothing, and yet, you're still alive. You're still moving and doing things, but you're thinking nothing, and you're feeling nothing. So there's [pause], there's no healthy motivation for anything. You know, I mean, in order to, you know, get any relief from that, you needed another something. You know, another fuck, or another fix, or another something [to see if you are still alive].

Conversation partners who had been in the foster care system shared a different perspective on the experience of living on the streets. Mandy said, "I didn't really care. I mean, 'cause I always had clean clothes, I was always showered, so I didn't, I chose to be there. It's not like I didn't have a, I chose to be homeless."

Bonnie, who had also been in the foster care system, shared that she chose street life over other forms of being housed because,

> [When] I finally got a foster home, it was with a lady that did not love the kids, and she made it known. We didn't have any food, and she was always going away on trips, and the foster kids would be home [by themselves].

She continued, "You know, on the streets, I had food. I had everything I needed. You know, I was warm. I made sure I had a place to sleep." Bonnie shared that even when she had to go without food or shelter, it was better than being in foster care. She said, "[it may be] cold for two or three nights, but in the end, it's worth it."

Although some conversation partners viewed street life as relatively positive, most conversation partners found being on the streets difficult and undesirable. Some of them coped with their lives through creative endeavors. However, many others struggled with issues of personal space, emotional pain, boredom, depression, and substance misuse. The next category reveals how conversation partners overcame the streets.

Transition

This category was defined as the period of time between which conversation partners made the decision to get off the streets and the time they moved into their own place of residence. Three main themes emerged within this category: (a) Not For Me, (b) Support, and (c) Roadblocks and Barrriers. Each theme is defined below.

Not For Me. This theme was defined as an unwillingness on the part of conversation partners to accept the streets as home. For many of them, the decision to be off the streets occurred almost within the first moments of being there. Mary said, "I just like decided, like the first time I was out

there [on the streets] that I was not going to be here for long. I was not gonna just like be on the streets begging for change."

Moreover, many conversation partners actively sought ways to transition off the streets. Jeff stated, "I mean, everyday that I was on the streets, you know, everyday, I was, I was making an effort to get off. Everything I did was to try and get off the streets." He said that he contacted "some lawyer firm for homeless teens" to find out about resources for street youths. From the social service agency, he "learned the system really well...what the government could do and what they would do."

These quotes reveal that conversation partners thought about and actively pursued ways off the streets early in their experiences as street youths. The next theme illustrates the various forms of support conversation partners received which played a role in their transition off the streets.

Support. This theme was defined as the actions taken by conversation partners and the support they received to transition off the streets. For all conversation partners, transitioning off the streets was a process that unfolded over time. For some, friends were the sole source of support utilized to facilitate transitioning off the streets. Lynn said,

> So [my friend] and I started talking about how it would be if I like lived with her, if her [sic] and I got a house. Her [sic] and a schoolmate of hers were already thinking about renting a house and wanting to know if I wanted to come live with them, too.

Other conversation partners sought informal sources of support, prior to seeking out social service agencies. Claudia shared that her high school librarian had "taken [her] under her wing" by providing Claudia with a temporary home when she needed a place to stay. Claudia elaborated,

> These folks kinda helped me like get my license, so then I could at least drive....So, that kind of worked out, and they, and those folks, they parented me as best they could....I made it through, and I got, I finished my semester of high school, and I left.

Ed revealed that a church pastor had played an important role in his life. He said the pastor "was always there. He was at school everyday to make sure [I] was there. He'd [find me], wake me up, pick me up, and take me to school." Ed seemed certain that he would not have finished school if it had not been for the encouragement and support that he received from that individual.

In Claudia's experience, sponsors played a significant role in her transition. She said,

> One of the people, or two of the people that [sic] I am connected to in terms of like family are these two lesbians who kind of, they called the Community Living Room, and they wanted to help a young lesbian who wanted to go to college....So, I met them, and...I decided that I would live with them for a while, and I lived with them for a year, and they paid my tuition for a good portion of my undergraduate career.

An alternative to utilizing social service agencies was combining informal sources of support with joining the military. Paul shared,

> I ended up moving in with this guy and his family. They, they helped me out. I don't know, there's a whole bunch more to it than that, you

> know. I don't remember all the details. I ended up living with this guy, and I lived with him for like, I don't remember, four months? You know, and then, I ended up getting a little job again, just enough so I could pay his parents a little rent money, a little food money.

Paul recounted that his friend was talking about going into the army. Paul said that he realized at this point that he "really need[ed] to get out of this area, if [he] was going to make it [off the streets]." Paul further shared, "I needed to go get a foundation going, start my life, and I used the military to do it." He explained that he needed a place where his basic needs were taken care of, so he could save some money and plan for the future.

Both female conversation partners who had been in the foster care system voiced that seeking services had been undesirable. Their stories revealed that they felt a lack of concern towards them on the part of those employed by the system. Mandy said,

> If you're not grown up, and you're in the system, then people just take advantage of you, walk all over you.... So, in the group home, the counselors, they, like they don't even give a shit. I mean they didn't even care. All they care about is [that] they get money for us. So, I was a case number.

However, both of them became pregnant while on the streets and sought agency services at that time. They each said that they did not want to raise their babies on the streets. Mandy shared the following:

> I was 16 when I got pregnant. I stayed at the drop-in [center] for four months, I think....I didn't want to be pregnant living at the drop-in, and then Catholic Charities has a program, and they send you to employment training and pay for your housing. So, we paid half for me, and they paid [partner's]....[Before getting pregnant], I had

> nobody to worry about but myself. So, it was different, and with me and [partner], it was just me and [partner], and then when she [daughter] came, that's when it was different. Until then, it was just us. With her, [I will] not let that [living on the streets] happen....It just won't happen.

Although all conversation partners acquired the support they needed to transition off the streets, they also encountered a variety of barriers in the process. These are identified in the next theme.

Roadblocks and Barriers. This theme was defined as anything that made transitioning off the streets difficult. It included both physical roadblocks and psychological barriers. Physical roadblocks were those things that prevented conversation partners from seeking or obtaining services or from reaching their goals. Psychological barriers included anything that affected conversation partners' emotional state, thus impacting their ability to seek assistance.

There were three physical roadblocks: (a) Life Essentials, (b) Knowledge, and (c) Gaps in Services. The first physical roadblock included dealing with the everyday practicalities that were necessary for reaching their goals. Claudia stated,

> It was really, it was a very, very difficult time. It was really, I was, I had no money, and so, it was a pretty depressing time. It was just, I would wake up, I would go to school, and then, when I was done with school...I would walk up the highway to this bus stop where I would catch, there was this free shuttle that would take me to where I would work.... I, like I needed contact lenses, and, or glasses. I didn't have any glasses, and I needed, and I lost my, I lost one of my contact lenses...and so I, for many months, went to school with just one

> contact lens. So, I was pretty much, I was, you know, I was really struggling.

The second physical roadblock was knowledge about available resources. Although they were willing, many conversation partners did not know how to go about leaving the streets behind. Cara shared the following:

> I was sitting on the El Camino, and I was so cold. I was sitting across the street from a Jack in the Box, just sitting at the bus stop, and these freaky people were walking by me, like three in the morning. I was just waiting for the bus. I just didn't know where to go, and I just started crying....I was just like, "This isn't right. This isn't the way I grew up. This isn't what I want for myself." So, I realized that I needed to do something about it, but it took me a while to do something because I mean, I sat there, and I was like, "I want to do this. I want to do this," but I didn't know how. I had no idea....There isn't really anything that I know of in San Jose for homeless people.

The third physical roadblock was gaps in the services available to street youths. Locating social service agencies was not a guarantee of receiving services or receiving them in a consistent manner. Service gaps were due to (a) lack of services for specific groups of youths, (b) shelter policies, and (d) lack of coordination between services.

There were a few groups of youths who had a difficult time accessing services. The first of these was street youths who were perceived as not "needy enough." Jeff said,

> You know, I come from the upper-middle class, and there's nothing out here for us. You know, everything's okay. You're a white, Caucasian male, and you're from the upper-middle class. You have no problems. Your parents will pay for it. You know, unh, unh. I don't think so. It just doesn't work like that.

The second group of youths who shared their struggle with the lack of services was gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered youths. Randy stated,

> The youth, especially gay and lesbian youth, I mean, it's such a huge issue! I mean, gay kids are fucked, you know what I mean, in so many ways, and it's just not recognized. I mean, it's so much easier to be gay and be fucked than anybody, anybody else. You know, to be homeless, and drugged out, and wanting to die, and that kind of stuff....I really think homeless shelters [for gay and lesbian youths] are a good idea. You know, I do. I think that they're needed.

The third group of youths who had a difficult time was older street youths, that is, 18 to 23 years of age. Cara stated,

> I mean, people who are 18 and older, they don't have the choice of going in to stay, go[ing] to stay into [sic] a youth shelter. I mean, they go and stay in shelters with all these older, old bums that live on the streets, and kind of like, they've been out there for so long that they don't do, they don't think they can do anything for themselves, and it's a really scary situation to be in. You know, I don't want to stay in a shelter with some old homeless guy.

The second roadblock encountered by conversation partners was shelter policies including age restrictions, limited hours of operation, and work requirements. Age restrictions had an impact on the transition for a number of conversation partners and left them to fend for themselves on the streets. Mary said,

> That last month, I had signed up to go into Job Corps where I could get my GED, have a place to stay, have some food, have, you know, 'cause I knew I wasn't going to be able to go to high school. So, I had to wait a month to get in. So, I didn't have anything to do for a month. So, I'm on the streets, you know, drinking....You know, just like messing around with guys even though I knew I did not like guys, just

> doing stupid, you know, stupid things.... [Because] if you were, let me think, at the time, if you were 17 or older, you could not stay at the shelter. You were too old to stay at the shelter. You could come in the afternoon, and take a shower, and rest for a couple of hours, and eat, but you could not stay there.

In addition to age restrictions, limited hours of operation and work requirements created problems for some conversation partners. Jeff was living in a shelter when his appendix ruptured. He was taken to the hospital for surgery and afterwards was told by the surgeon that he would need bed rest for six weeks. Jeff said that he couldn't stay at the shelter because "during the day, you have to be gone." He had to return home to an abusive environment, and he ultimately lost his place at the shelter. Jeff said,

> So, I went to live with my parents again, and then I went back to Redwood City, and I had to get a job again 'cause I lost my other one 'cause of how long I was gone, and I tried to get a job, and I just, I couldn't get one. So, I had to leave the program, 'cause you have to have a job. So what I did, I just kind of, I went back to staying on the streets.

The third roadblock that conversation partners encountered was the lack of coordinated services. Bonnie's story highlighted this issue. She said,

> I had been working, so I was making a well [sic] amount of money, and [partner] was making alright money. So, together, we were doing all right. So, we stayed in a motel for about two months, and we were paying like $400 a week, and we could not keep paying that.

Bonnie said that she and her partner had filled out applications for

low-income housing and were staying in the motel until they received notification that they had been accepted. The acceptance was on the condition that they still met the income requirements. She stated, "We really didn't [anymore]. So, we had to lie about it. We made too little, 'cause I wasn't working 'cause I had to quit my job because we couldn't pay for child care." Bonnie said that during the time they were renting the motel room, they "actually ran out of money" because it was so expensive. She stated, "We didn't have anymore money left. We didn't even have money to get into this place [apartment]." Bonnie and her partner were able to gather enough funds from a variety of sources to move into the low-income housing for which they had waited. She shared,

> So, what happened was the lady we were living with before, she paid, we got some money, I borrowed some money from a few different people, so we had about $700, and then [the lady we were living with before] gave us about $1,400 to move in here. She paid our first month and our deposit, and then we paid the rest. We didn't even have enough to pay the next month's rent.

They had used every cent to obtain housing and Bonnie said, "We had no food at all. So, we were going to the churches to get food and stuff. We still do that."

In addition to physical roadblocks, conversation partners were also confronted with psychological barriers. These included: (a) Strength to Follow Through, (b) Ability to Ask for Help, (c) Identity Issues, (d) Trust, and (e) Letting Go.

The first psychological barrier was the strength to follow through on the decision to get off the streets. Some conversation partners voiced that this was more difficult than making the decision. Paul said,

> The first step right there, saying, "I'm going to." The next step is trying to carry out what you just said, and that's where the struggle begins, really. I mean, it's hard all through the streets. It's hard, you know, all through, but that's when it really gets hard, is getting up and getting off. You know, and it's just a fight....As long as you don't give up, it'll get better. You know, a lot of 'em just give up and say screw it, but I mean I had that mentality too, but it was like deep down I said, "No," you know? I still was clean...I just said, "No, screw this," and I started fighting.

This barrier was closely linked to the second psychological barrier, Ability to Ask for Help.

Many conversation partners shared that they struggled with asking for help. As revealed by Claudia,

> I had to make the first step to ask, initially, and there is help there. I mean, you know, that's the whole thing. It's just finding ways of making it. It's hard to ask. It's really hard to ask. It's very humbling....Getting somebody a place to live is the hardest obstacle because it's a huge, it's a huge thing to ask for, I think.

Some conversation partners found that they were unable to bring themselves to utilize the services provided by social service agencies. Paul said,

> I never could, I couldn't, I couldn't do the shelter thing. I just had too much pride, I think, too much pride and too much, too much, I guess, honor. You know, I wouldn't let myself do that. So, you know, basically friend to friend, house to house, you know, wherever I could find a place.

The third psychological barrier, the issue of identity, was a critical one for most conversation partners. In order to seek and accept help, they had to assume the identity of a homeless person. When they were on the streets, conversation partners placed themselves at various points along a continuum of identity. At one end were conversation partners who did not identify as homeless. Cara said,

> I looked normal. I would go and take a shower at my friends' houses and borrow their clothes. I was just like, "Oh, I'm just another," 'cause I know a few people that were just like staying at people's houses, like my brother was the same way. He still is the same way. He's 23 now, and he's still doing the living in his truck, and living at friends' houses, and stuff. Like I knew a lot of people like that, and I was just like, "Oh, I'm just partying," you know, hanging out stuff.

At the center of the continuum were conversation partners who considered themselves to be homeless but who worked very hard to pass as not being in that state. Jeff shared,

> Everything was in my locker, and I remember just, I was pretty much always late for class 'cause I'd be, they'd be there. I had to wait until everybody else was gone before I opened my locker, so they wouldn't see it. I'd get there like five o'clock in the morning just to pick out the clothes I wanted to wear for the day, so pretty much nobody would know. They didn't have to.

At the other end of the continuum were conversation partners who were completely enveloped by their homeless identity. Claudia stated,

> It's like, it's this mindset. It's like you just, you move through your world in that, with that mind, with like those glasses on, and that's how you see the world, and that's how you, you know, that's how you related to the world, and that's how you move through the world, and

> that's who you connect with in the world, and that's how you connect to the world.

The issue of trust was the fourth psychological barrier, and most conversation partners found this difficult, particularly trusting adults. Randy said,

> You know, I was so freaked out 'cause I was doing everything they told me too, but I was still so suspicious. I didn't believe 'em [sic]. There was no way I could foresee a future for myself....A lot of that had to do with trust too, because it's very difficult to trust people in that regard, you know? So, I think trust will always be an issue. You know, it's really hard to trust what somebody's telling you because we've all been lied to.

In addition to being lied to, conversation partners had been hurt. Mary shared,

> [I'm] the kind of person who it [sic] takes a while to let people in because of, you know, what happened to me and my mother....You know, and it was just like that's the person who I loved, who loved me, and who knew me, and she shit all over me. So, I was, so I build up a lot of walls around me, and I, I you know, I mean people have to earn the right to get to know me.

The inability to trust made the next barrier, Letting Go, all the more significant.

The fifth psychological barrier to transitioning off the streets was having to let go of friendships, community support, and feelings of control. All conversation partners shared how difficult it was to leave friends behind in order to move on with their lives. Speaking about his closest friend, Randy said,

> We're like really good friends. We're really, really tight. We've been through a lot together. We really trust each other, and unlike most gay men, we can actually talk to each other and shit like that, but he drinks a lot. You know, and I'm not really drinking a lot anymore....We'll see how it plays out.

In addition to relinquishing individual friendships, for some conversation partners, transitioning meant leaving an entire community behind. Referring to those she had formed relationships with at the drop-in center and shelter, Claudia shared,

> We went everywhere together and did everything together which was good in some ways. I mean, it helped us kind of form community and support each other. It was difficult in others because you know, when the time came for me to kind of move on and do, you know, other things, that was a difficult separation to make....So, I definitely lost contact with a couple of folks.

Claudia added "I wonder what happened to them...and I just hope that they're okay....You know, every once in a while, it's like I look around and see if they're there, if they're still out there."

These changes brought mixed reactions. Some conversation partners were working on accepting their new situation. Randy said,

> I'm right now at a point where I don't really know if I can really rely on most people in my life, unfortunately, but that's okay, too. You know, because I think though, you know, having them [old friends] leave my life will make room for more people. You know, it's okay.

Other conversation partners expressed feelings of loneliness and depression. Bonnie shared, "While you're accepting that, I mean, you get depressed."

Most conversation partners struggled with relinquishing feelings of control over their lives to persons of authority in order to take the steps necessary to transition off the streets. Randy shared the following:

> He [a friend] brought a little [social service agency] pamphlet for me, and I was like, "Oh, that's what I want," and it kind of stayed in my head. You know, I didn't want to do it, but I was like, I was like, "Dude, how am I going to get anywhere doing what I'm doing?" I didn't want to do it at all....So, I made a deal with myself, and I said, "Okay, here's what I'll do. I'll take a trip up north through Oregon and Washington, and then I'll come back, and I'll have a great time, and then I'll come back, and I'll move in to [transitional housing], and I'll get my shit together." It was a deal, so I did it.

Because giving up control was so difficult, some conversation partners utilized agency services a number of times prior to transitioning off the streets. Ed stated,

> I only stayed in the shelter so long because I wasn't, I wasn't raised being confined and, you know, at that age I felt like I was adult already. I had adult responsibilities, so I had, my mind had to be an adult. So, it was like, what do they want? What are they doing? Who are they? Why are they trying to act like my parents?

Ed added that he would "always go and look for a girl and go hang out with them for a couple of days." Alternatively, he would go back to his mother, but he "could only take it for so long, and there [he] was again, back at the shelter."

With the exception of conversation partners who had been in foster care, all conversation partners wanted to be off the streets almost from the first moments they were on them. Although they were not always aware of

available services, conversation partners actively pursued avenues of support and worked to create better lives for themselves.

In spite of making early decisions to be off the streets, conversation partners encountered many issues, both physical and psychological, that delayed their transition off the streets. In the next category, conversation partners revealed those things they found most helpful in their transition and things they believed would have helped but were lacking.

What Kids Need

This category was defined as the services that were most useful to conversation partners, and the things they felt were missing. Six themes emerged in this category. They were (a) What Helped, (b) Someone to Listen, (c) Emotional Support, (d) Need to Connect, (e) Skill Building, and (f) Solving the Problem. Each is defined below.

What Helped. This was defined as the factors that were most instrumental in conversation partners getting off the streets. They cited two key factors. The first was having basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter met. Paul said,

> Make sure that the support is there for them. You know, like, the key is just getting them on that right track, a job. You know, a place that they can stay, so they can get this job going, 'cause when you're out there, yeah, you can get the job, but then you can't keep the job. That's the hardest part, keeping the job.

The second most significant factor was job training. Ed shared, "There's opportunities for job training....I mean, it's lucky that I got the training and the skills to be where I'm at now....I make $16 an hour, and I just, because I got up, and I went [for job training]."

This first theme highlighted things that made a difference in conversation partners' ability to transition off the streets. The next four themes address the items that conversation partners believed were important but lacking from their experience.

Someone to Listen. This theme was defined as youths' need for adults to listen without advising or judging. All conversation partners stressed this as an issue. Mandy shared the following:

> Listen, listen! Nobody ever listens! All they want to do is talk about how these teens are doing this, and everybody's doing this, you know. That's all they need to do is listen, 'cause that's all kids want is somebody that will listen to them. They don't take kids seriously, and that's not cool. Believe it or not, I had a lot of things to say, but nobody listened! So, just listen. Don't lecture, or I'll go. They need to be open. Close their minds, and open their hearts, and I think they would get [sic] a lot of places.

In addition to listening, most conversation partners shared that they needed encouragement from adults.

Emotional Support. This was defined as the need for adults to be sensitive to youths' experiences and supportive of them. Many conversation partners argued that adults need to be sensitive to the fact that street youths are in an extremely fragile state. Paul said that adults need to look

beyond the way street youths appear and understand that "these are some seriously stressed out, mentally not okay, emotionally not okay, physically not okay [kids]. They might look it, but they are not." He added that street youths' experiences "take a toll on a person, the things they've seen, the things they have to do [to survive]."

In addition to being sensitive, Claudia argued that adults need to "stand back" and assess each youth as an individual in order to "get a sense of where people [youths] are." One size fits all timelines do not work. She asserted that adults oftentimes feel let down by youths because they do not have realistic expectations. Claudia stated,

> You know, when you're talking about somebody who's struggling with substance abuse and addiction, to expect that they're going to show up for a job interview, or show up for treatment, or show up for anything like that, is really difficult.

Randy said, "Don't lose hope. It takes a lot, a whole lot [to get off the streets]." He went on to say that often adults are "put off" by youths' appearance. "You know, I looked a lot different. I had a big mohawk. Bear with us...have a little faith [in us]."

Referring to the most important things that adults can do for street youths, Jeff said that it was important to have patience and provide encouragement. "Let them know that it's okay to fail, but you know, not to give up. Just keep on trying." Claudia added, "You know, they're there [on the streets] because something happened....You're not going to go and get

somebody to come off, to get off the street and get their shit together overnight. It just doesn't happen."

The importance of a stable and constant adult presence in street youths' lives was revealed in the following from Randy, "Jon was very special....I mean, I can't even begin to describe it. He was the only sober person in my life and the only person who could have a conversation with me and not flip out and run away."

Once adults have proven that they are trustworthy, the real work of can begin. Claudia said, "Then, I think you can start with pieces. You know, with helping to kind of guide or facilitate them into places that, you know, that they might not have been initially willing to go."

The desire to receive support was not limited to that which adults and agencies could provide but extended to peers as well. As illustrated in the next theme, some conversation partners expressed the need to develop relationships with other former street youths.

Need to connect. This was defined as the need to connect with others who had been through similar experiences. Many conversation partners expressed this need. For Bonnie, it was because she felt uncomfortable with those who had not lived on the streets. She said,

> [When you are not on the streets], you feel like you're not as good as some of the other people around you, so you won't go and talk to them first....I don't know how to say it, but you don't feel as clean, or as, I don't know, because at one point, they looked down on you....You

> know, and so, you see those people around you, and so, you're afraid to go up to them 'cause oh, maybe they'll recognize me, or you know, maybe they, they just know, or I know, which is worse.

Paul shared that he wanted to be able to process what they had been through with others who could understand. He said,

> You know, you can only hold so much in, and then you have to get it out. You know, just somewhere to just go and maybe people can meet and just talk about their experiences out there on the streets, and with drugs, and with gangs, and with just all that stuff that goes along with the streets.

He added that by talking about his experiences with others, he might be able to "close that chapter of [his] life." He said that he felt that this was part of "the healing process" that needed to occur, so he "could get on with [his] life."

The previous three themes relate to conversation partners' emotional needs. The next theme, although linked to emotional needs, is more practical in nature.

Skill Building. This was defined as the areas in which conversation partners felt they had missed out on training and skill development because they had been on the streets. Some conversation partners expressed a lack of knowledge about dating, relationships, and parenting. Bonnie shared the following about her relationship with her partner,

> It's really hard because it's almost like I try to get [partner] to, you know, not be too close to me because I don't want him to hurt me by leaving me. You know? So, I mean different things like that, and

> then he does things too, like from his past, that affect our relationship. So, together, I mean, it's so hard.

Bonnie also shared her concerns about parenting,

> I don't know how to spend time with [daughter]. You know, so, even like teaching, you know, people, like for me, I guess, for after foster care, parenting type things. I guess, kind of strange, but is [sic] how to be a parent. I have no idea. My mom didn't teach me, you know. I don't know what to do with her. So, I don't want to go through the same mistakes that my mom did. So, how do I change that?

Conversation partners were very clear about the types of support that helped them and the types of support they would have liked to receive. However, as revealed in the following theme, no amount of support will solve the problem of youths on the streets.

Solving the Problem. This theme was defined as what could be done to solve the issue of youth homelessness. Almost all conversation partners stated that the issue of youths on the streets was not going to go away. However, Bonnie shared that she thought interventions could minimize the amount of time youths are on the streets. She said,

> I don't (pause), I think we'll always have youth on the street for a period of time. Like, right now, I guess you could say some kids stay out for six months. You know, then that period of time for each child could go down. You know, but they'll always run away from home. You know, kids will always be running away from home. Even if it's for just a day. You know, you will never be able to take that away, but, but we can reduce the amount of time that they're on the streets, you know, by building relationships with them.

Conversation partners shared that support was the most significant item in helping them transition off the streets. This came in the form of someone believing in them, providing encouragement, and assisting them in getting their basic needs met, so they could find jobs where they earned enough to support themselves.

Conversation partners said that what they most needed from adults was for them to be patient, understanding, and respectful of what youths have to say. Moreover, they needed opportunities to make new friends once they transitioned off the streets and to be able to process what they had been through, in order to move on with their lives. Furthermore, conversation partners needed opportunities to develop the skills necessary to function as psychologically healthy adults.

In spite of everything that's done, most conversation partners shared that they believe the problem of youth homelessness is here to stay. However, many of them believe that the issue could be mitigated through specific efforts.

The next category sheds light on conversation partners' lives once they moved into their own place of residence.

<u>After the Streets</u>

This category was defined as the range of time beginning from the point at which conversation partners moved into their own place of

residence to the present. Four main themes emerged within this category: (a) Remembering, (b) What If, (c) Home, and (d) Looking Ahead. Each of these is defined below.

Remembering. This theme was defined as reminding oneself about what it was like to be on the streets, the incidents that led up to being on the streets, and the difficulties encountered getting off the streets.

Although all conversation partners recognized the need to accept change and move on, many of them voiced the need to remember where they had been. Their words suggested that remembering was a form of protection against becoming homeless again. Cara said,

> I give myself so much credit [for getting off the streets], but I mean I have to, or else I'll lose sight of what I've done, and I could end up back out there, if I don't say, "Look how much you've achieved in a year and a half."

Remembering also served to keep them humble. Paul shared,

> The hardest part for me now is like forgetting where I come from. You know, forgetting that I've been there. For instance, I had a guy the other day...and I don't know if he was homeless. He looked a little tattered, wasn't bad, you know, but he was scrounging for change, and I almost looked at him like, you know, I don't even want to say, this isn't really me, but I'll say it. I mean, at first I wasn't going to give him any, and then I gave him my change and said, "Hey, get a job." You know, and then all the way back, all the way back, I mean, it bothered me all day. I was just like, "I told that guy," that's fucked up. You know, cause it ain't that easy to get a job when you, if he's in one of those positions that I was in. You know, I was like, "Damn." You know, I forgot where I came from. It's like it sort of struck home, and it's like, you know, it's just not that easy.

In addition to remembering where they had been, most conversation partners speculated on where they might be today if they had not gotten off the streets. Their thoughts are contained in the next theme.

What If. This theme was defined as having reflected on where they might be today if they had not transitioned off the streets. Some conversation partners were unsure. Ed said, "When that opportunity came to me, I grabbed onto it, and I held onto it, and I did it, and I completed it. Without that, I don't know where I would be right now." Other conversation partners shared that their lives could have gone in a variety of ways. Cara stated,

> I could have either moved in with my grandma and gotten a full time job, and then moved out, gotten a place, or I could just be like really, you know, I'd be really fucked up. You know, I could either, do either of those. You know, still be into, into like coke and crystal.

A number of both females and males predicted more dire consequences. Mandy shared, "I'd have been in jail. I would have been in prison right now, definitely," and Paul said, "Jail and death. Yeah, death."

Although the previous two themes, Remembering and What If, reveal conversation partners' work to come to terms with the past, the next theme reveals how they were experiencing the present.

Home. This theme was defined as anything that related to the experience of being in their own home. Five main concepts emerged. These

included: (a) Acceptance (b) Relationships, (c) Comfort, (d) Personal Space, and (e) Safety.

Moving into their own homes required significant psychological adjustment for most conversation partners. This included letting go of old ideas about the meaning of home and embracing new ones. Randy said,

> My goal is to try and allow myself that feeling of home, 'cause I'm pretty sure it feels good....Sometimes I'm there, and I still feel uncomfortable....So, I'm kind of working on that, and I think I'm making a little progress. You know, kind of relax and be like, wait a minute, I own this air....So, I, I just try to think about that and try to really get to a point where I try to make myself understand, my emotional self understand that this is mine.

For some, home did not immediately connote comfort.

> [Home is] scary sometimes for me too, actually, because I don't know. It seems like I could be there forever, almost, or something. I don't know. It's [pause], it's, sometimes, it feels too isolated. You know? It makes me feel like I'm not in touch with, like the world is just gonna pass me by.

Feelings about home that develop over a lifetime and are influenced by the experience of living on the street take time to overcome. Some conversation partners had lived in extremely abusive environments that did not allow them to feel immediately positive about home. Randy said, "I didn't have a concept of home to pursue and create. I didn't care! You know, why would I want to build what I experienced? You know? You know." Claudia shared,

> That took me many, many years to kind of let go of and kind of move to kind of a place of being able to, to be, to be living versus

> surviving....So, you know, the actual, you know, period of time was not long, of actual homelessness, but the emotional effects of that and kind of the resituating, the transitional time was a couple of years before I actually felt, where I started to get that, you know, that I had a home.

Although some conversation partners spoke about struggling with accepting home, all of them shared that home was a positive place where they could have their basic needs met. Moreover, it was perceived by most conversation partners as a place to receive love. Paul said,

> Home, now, is somewhere where I've got a place to sleep with shelter, and I can provide food for myself, and there's love. You need all those things to survive. Some people say, "Oh, I don't need love," but there's only so long you can go without love. You need that nurturing, that nourishment. You're human. I guess that's it, shelter, warmth, food, water, and love. I'm a pretty basic person.

Most conversation partners viewed home as a place to spend time with friends and family. Bonnie shared,

> [Home] definitely [must have] a nice living room, so that your entire family could gather around it, and you know, play games, and watch TV, and have family nights, and eat popcorn, and eat, you know, dinners, or a table. They all need a table because, I mean, just to sit down and have dinner with your family every night, I mean, that's really special.

For Mandy, home was the place where she could finally receive respect. She said, "A home is a loving environment with a family, and structure, and giving love and respect, giving it at the same time. Getting it and giving, works two ways."

In addition to being a place to spend time with those they care about, conversation partners also shared that home was a place where they could be comfortable. Ed said, "My definition of home is being comfortable, being able to talk to people that you live with....A place where you can get up, and go to the frig [sic], and fix yourself a bite to eat. That's a home."

Most conversation partners revealed that having personal space within their home was important to them. Claudia shared, "I always want a space that's mine in a house. You know, a room with a door, so that I can go in and close it, and it's my space."

Finally, most conversation partners voiced that home provided them with a safe haven. Ed shared, "I don't worry about anything. It's my home. I feel safe. I feel protected. That's the way a home should feel." Paul elaborated on the same theme: "I can see and let the people in I want to see. Otherwise, I can say, go away. You know, get out of here."

As they were settling into their new homes, conversation partners were also looking ahead to the future.

The Future. This theme is defined as having thoughts about or plans for the future. Prior to transitioning off the streets, conversation partners had a difficult time envisioning a future for themselves. Many of them felt hopeless. Randy shared,

> You know, 'cause I knew I was making mistakes when I was making them. I just didn't care.... I mean I definitely, I'm sure you've heard

> this before, too. I definitely, oftentimes feel like, you know, I had no future, like, you know, something awful's going to happen to fuck everything up at any given point.

However, transitioning off the streets and witnessing the results of their efforts led to a new found sense of confidence. Cara stated,

> So, it's like, and I mean after living out by myself for a month and a half, I still have almost $4,000. So, I mean, and I just got a good job, and I've been making good money for about a year now. So, I'm feeling really confident now about my situation, my living situation.

Feeling positive about their current situation motivated conversation partners to take steps to ensure a good future for themselves. This included establishing support networks. Ed said,

> I think I'll be fine. I mean, I got [sic] some people in my life now that are, you know, I proved to them that I can do it. I proved to 'em that, you know, I'm a stable person, and I have help now. You know, if anything happens, I know that I'll have help. They can help me. That's important. That was important to me, to get people back in my life like that, that I can trust, and they can trust me.

Not relying solely on interpersonal safety nets, most conversation partners were creating and working toward long-term goals. Ed shared, "I think about retirement at this age. I think about 401K plans....I think about all that stuff already because it [time] goes on you, it goes so, so fast! The time just goes by so fast."

Mandy was working towards becoming a probation officer. She was completing her "last year at Yuba City [Community College]." She added

that the next step would be "going to Chico State for two more years [to get her] Bachelor's [degree]."

Both conversation partners with children voiced a strong determination to create a better life for their babies than they had as children. Mandy said,

> 'Cause she's not going to go the way I did. I have a whole different perspective on parenting than most parents have. 'Cause I just don't want her to go that way. I'm breaking the cycle. 'Cause I got taken from my mom; my mom got taken from her mom, and her mom got taken from her mom. So, it's a whole thing, and I'm stoppin' [sic] it. This is where it stops, with me. That's the end of it.

Ed was planning for the children he hopes to have some day. He said, "I think about college tuition for my kids. I think of savings account for my kids....I like to be prepared."

These four themes, Remembering, What If, Home, and The Future, illustrate how life after the streets was a juggling act for conversation partners. There was a strong tension between holding on to memories about life before and on the streets and adjusting to life in their own homes after transitioning off the streets. Although the psychological adjustment to housed living was difficult and took time, conversation partners were also finding comfort in their new homes. No longer having to worry daily about meeting their basic needs for food and shelter, conversation partners were able to focus on planning for their future.

Summary

Almost all conversation partners shared that prior to becoming street youths, they had the distinct experience of feeling different from others. This sense began when they were quite young, and conversation partners experienced a range of emotions as a consequence. These included emotional pain, feelings of hopelessness, and anger. Nevertheless, conversation partners sought connections with peers. As they entered high school, the pressure to fit in became more intense, and conversation partners gravitated towards groups that would accept them.

Although they had difficulties with relationships, and they seemed vulnerable, conversation partners' stories also revealed strengths. Their narratives contained evidence of assuming adult responsibilities, the ability to think independently, a willingness to take risks, and perseverance.

Most conversation partners revealed that they had not wanted to be on the streets. Moreover, they decided almost within the first moments on the streets that they would not be there for long. Only conversation partners who had been in foster care said that they preferred street life over housed living arrangements.

In spite of their early desire to get off the streets, conversation partners encountered numerous roadblocks to transitioning. These were both physical and psychological in nature. They included practical

situations that blocked their goals, lack of knowledge regarding services, gaps in services, difficulty asking for help, issues of identity and trust, and letting go of the past.

Conversation partners shared their thoughts about the types of support that were most helpful. These included having their basic needs for food and shelter met, obtaining job skills, and having a safe environment in which to assess their lives and plan for their futures.

Moving into their own place of residence created a sense of ambivalence for many conversation partners. For some of them, home had not always been a positive environment, and they were struggling to adjust emotionally. Furthermore, most of them had to transition psychologically from life on the streets and in shelters to life alone behind walls. In spite of these difficulties, conversation partners were finding home a comfortable and positive place to be and were looking ahead to the future.

Although every conversation partner's story was different, and some highlighted specific issues, there were many similar themes. Each narrative contained wisdom and insights. The quotes presented here are indicative of the richness of the data gathered. In the next two chapters, the results will be synthesized and recommendations for future research, practice, and policy will be noted.

Chapter 5

Discussion

The researcher came naturally to this work after more than 20 years of combined experience as a youth advocate, volunteering in and consulting for schools, and as a crisis counselor. These experiences provided evidence to the researcher that youths have no power within institutions and are silenced by society. Moreover, youths are one of the most highly regulated groups within our society and are often discriminated against. As true as this is for youth in general, it is even more so for street youths who suffer the additional stigma of their status in society. The main goal of this work was to explore the process through which street youths journey into and through the experience of homelessness and overcome the concomitant feelings of isolation and difference. Most important, this inquiry sought to explicate the inner sources of strength these young individuals drew upon in order to successfully negotiate the process of reconnecting with others and transitioning into independent, domiciled living situations.

This chapter includes a discussion of the trustworthiness of the research, the limitations, a review of the methodology, some of the key themes that emerged, and the significance of this work.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of qualitative research may be judged by its credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility is the confidence one can have in the truth of the results. Credibility was established through the use of peer debriefings and member checks.

Peer debriefings were accomplished by sharing the data and ongoing data analysis with the members of the researcher's thesis committee. Member checks involved conversation partners who were asked to provide feedback at periodic intervals during data analysis, interpretation, and the formulation of conclusions. This was done in three ways: (a) At the end of each conversation, the researcher asked conversation partners questions as a check-in and to clarify anything that seemed ambiguous; (b) emergent concepts and themes were shared with later conversation partners; and (c) two conversation partners were asked to review the final set of concepts identified by the researcher. These methods served to ensure that the essence of the experiences of all conversation partners was accurately and adequately described.

Dependability refers to the stability of findings over time, and confirmability refers to the objectivity of the data. Both were accomplished through the use of an audit trail. All decisions regarding the creation of

categories and themes were documented throughout the process of analysis. Furthermore, intersubjective agreement between the researcher and an independent judge was achieved at each step of data analysis. The independent judge coded 10% of the data, and comparisons between the researcher's and the judge's codes were made. An agreement rate of 86% was reached with 85% being considered very good for coding purposes (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991).

According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), categories are considered saturated when additional information no longer adds much to existing explanations. The researcher's opinion is that saturation was reached because themes began to repeat, and there were no major new insights into the phenomena being explored.

Transferability refers to whether the findings can be transferred to similar contexts or situations and still preserve the meanings, interpretations, and inferences of the research. The goal of qualitative research is to produce in-depth understandings and knowledge of particular phenomena (Leininger, 1994). This was accomplished by providing the widest range of rich, thick descriptions from which someone interested in making a transfer can reach their own conclusion about its applicability to similar contexts, circumstances, or environmental conditions.

Limitations

Prior to data collection, sampling bias was noted as a potential limitation to this study. Initially, conversation partners were primarily recruited through agencies. To address this limitation and cast a wider recruiting net, an article was published in a local, community college newspaper; an advertisement was placed in a local, university newspaper; and flyers were posted on three college campuses. This resulted in a more diverse pool of conversation partners. However, the voices of Asian youths and youths from rural areas are absent from this research.

Access to former street youths is difficult because they are almost impossible to identify once they reintegrate into mainstream society. Because this study was qualitative and exploratory in nature, a small sample was deemed methodologically sound and in keeping with similar research. Nevertheless, recruiting efforts for future studies by other means including city newspapers, trade papers, church bulletins, and newsletters may yield a more diverse sample and reveal additional themes.

Methodology

Recruitment. Four directors at youth service agencies agreed to assist in recruiting former street youths. Three of the agencies provide comprehensive services specific to homeless youths. The other agency provides mental health services to homeless youths. Former street youths

were recruited through only two of the four agencies for the following reasons. First, one of the agencies that provides services specific to homeless youths did not follow through with its commitment. The director of that agency initially informed the researcher that there were some graduates from the program who had spoken on this topic before, and she thought there would be no problem recruiting some of them, or others, to be interviewed. After weeks of follow-up phone calls and no response from the director, the researcher finally reached the director and was informed that she had not been successful in her recruitment efforts. The director further informed the researcher that former street youths generally do not want to discuss their experiences, once they have moved beyond them. At that point, the researcher ceased contact with the agency.

There are three possible explanations for the director's behavior. The agreement to assist with recruitment was originally negotiated between the director's supervisor and the researcher. Although the director met with the researcher and verbally agreed to assist in recruitment, it is possible that the director did not have time to allocate to this additional duty. A second conceivable explanation is that the director was concerned about protecting the privacy of former clients, thus, failing to follow through with her commitment. The third viable explanation is that former street youths who received services from that agency did not want to talk about their

experiences. Nonetheless, because former street youths from other agencies were highly likely to talk, one must question why youths from this agency would not want to do so.

Only one youth was recruited through the agency that provides mental health services to homeless youths. However, the interview never took place. Although the researcher set the appointment up directly with the conversation partner and made follow-up phone calls the day before and the morning of the scheduled interview, at the last minute, the conversation partner said that she would not be available. She asked to reschedule for later the same day, and the researcher agreed to do so. When the researcher called later to reconfirm, there was no answer at the conversation partner's apartment. The researcher made five attempts to reach the conversation partner. On the last attempt, a friend of the conversation partner answered, and the researcher left a message. The conversation partner did not return the call. At that point, the researcher ceased follow-up attempts concluding that they would be futile.

No other conversation partners were recruited through this agency due to the agency's inability to locate former street youths. The director informed the researcher that youths tend to come in for services during crisis periods only, and they tend to lose contact with youths once they transition off the streets.

As discussed in chapter 3, an article requesting participants was published in a local, community college newspaper; and an advertisement was placed in a university newspaper, in order to widen the recruitment net. In addition, the editor of a third newspaper at a local, community college was contacted. This college campus is located in a middle to upper-middle class area. The researcher requested that the paper publish an article on the issue of homeless youths in order to assist the researcher with recruiting conversation partners. The response from the editor was that it was "a nice feature piece," but that it did not "match the voice of [the] newspaper," since they "try to localize [their] stories for [that particular college's] angle." It was apparent that the editor did not perceive the issue of homeless youths as one that would be relevant to their students. This incident highlights the fact that there is still much work to be done to raise awareness about street youths and to destroy the myths that exist.

Pacific Bell Telephone Company created an additional barrier to recruiting conversation partners. Because the researcher wanted to be as accessible by phone as possible to potential conversation partners, an existing phone line was dedicated for this purpose. The week after the newspaper article and advertisement ran, the researcher had to be out of town. The researcher left a recorded message on the answering machine stating that calls would be returned as soon as the researcher returned.

When the researcher returned home, she discovered that the phone line was dead. Apparently, the phone company had been doing some "repair" work on the lines and had cut the line to that telephone at the main box approximately one-half mile away. Although additional advertisements were placed in the newspaper, they were not fruitful. It is unknown how many calls were missed while the phone line was inoperable.

Interviews. Working with this population takes patience, persistence, and above all, flexibility. The researcher found that approaching conversation partners in an open, non-judgmental, respectful, flexible way led to them being open and willing to participate in the interviews. However, it became apparent early in this work that it would be necessary to schedule interviews at any time that was convenient for conversation partners, travel as far as necessary to obtain interviews, and conduct them in less than ideal situations. The first interview was scheduled in Paradise, a city in Northern California approximately 300 miles from the researcher's home. The conversation partner did not show up. The second interview was approximately 260 miles from the researcher's home. This time the conversation partner was present. Nevertheless, the interview was conducted outside her home in 100 degree heat, no more than 50 yards from a noisy highway, and in an area swarming with yellow jackets. Other

interviews were held in conversation partner's tiny bedrooms, in a private room in a local coffee house, in faculty offices, and empty classrooms.

In addition to being flexible with location, flexibility regarding scheduling interviews was important. Meetings took place every day of the week, and some of them went well into the evening hours. For example, one interview that was scheduled to begin at 6:30 P.M. on a Friday evening did not begin until almost 9:30 P.M. It was after midnight when both the conversation partner and the researcher decided to call it a night.

The researcher anticipated that former street youths would be interesting people with rich background experiences, and the results revealed that to be true. Conversation partners shared their stories about the experience of life before, during, and after the streets. By listening to them, we gain access to the meaning of pain and struggle in their early lives. Moreover, we are given a glimpse at the wisdom and resilience these young people possess. It was a privilege to gain their trust, have them open their hearts, and reveal their experiences. The following are the researcher's interpretations of the meaning of conversation partners' experiences based on an analysis of the data.

Before the Streets

Although many youths experience feeling different in their early teens, conversation partners shared a much earlier recognition of this

feeling. There seemed to be no common thread to this experience. For some, it came about as a result of classroom environments and teaching techniques that did not meet their needs. Others said that they were too intense, or competitive, or behaved in ways that were not considered gender-appropriate, resulting in difficulty getting along with peers. Other reasons cited for feeling different included frequently relocating and changing schools, making it difficult to establish long-term relationships with peers; being gay or biracial; having a parent die; dealing with difficult issues at home, that is, parents' substance misuse, physical or sexual abuse, or some combination of the above.

Although conversation partners indicated that they experienced feeling different, all of them persistently sought connection with peers. When they were unable to create relationships with individuals in the mainstream, many conversation partners sought connections with individuals outside the mainstream.

In addition to having a difficult time establishing relationships with peers, conversation partners' stories suggest that they may have provided many challenges in their interactions with adults. Many conversation partners exhibited determination and a willingness to question authority while they were quite young. Often, their actions led to negative consequences, rejection, and feelings of betrayal.

Society expects youths to follow rules without question. It would appear that conversation partners did not acquiesce quietly. The interplay that seems to have taken place between feeling different, seeking connection, and rejection may have played a significant role in driving these young people to the margins of society (see Figure 1). However, their stories also suggest that their persistence to connect with others and their willingness to challenge and engage adults may have played a role in conversation partners' ability to seek the resources necessary to transition off the streets.

The ability to go on, in spite of difficult situations, is clearly a sign of resilience. Other researchers have identified various factors linked to resiliency. These factors include a high IQ, good quality of parenting, a strong connection to other competent adults, a high internal locus of control, effective social skills, good problem solving skills, and a developed sense of meaning in their lives (Garmezy, Masten, & Tellegen, 1984; Luthar, 1991; Masten et al., 1988; Werner & Smith, 1982). Although it is not clear how many of these factors conversation partners possessed, all of them were extraordinarily persistent in seeking connection and determined to do things their way. It may be that these are additional markers of resiliency in youths.

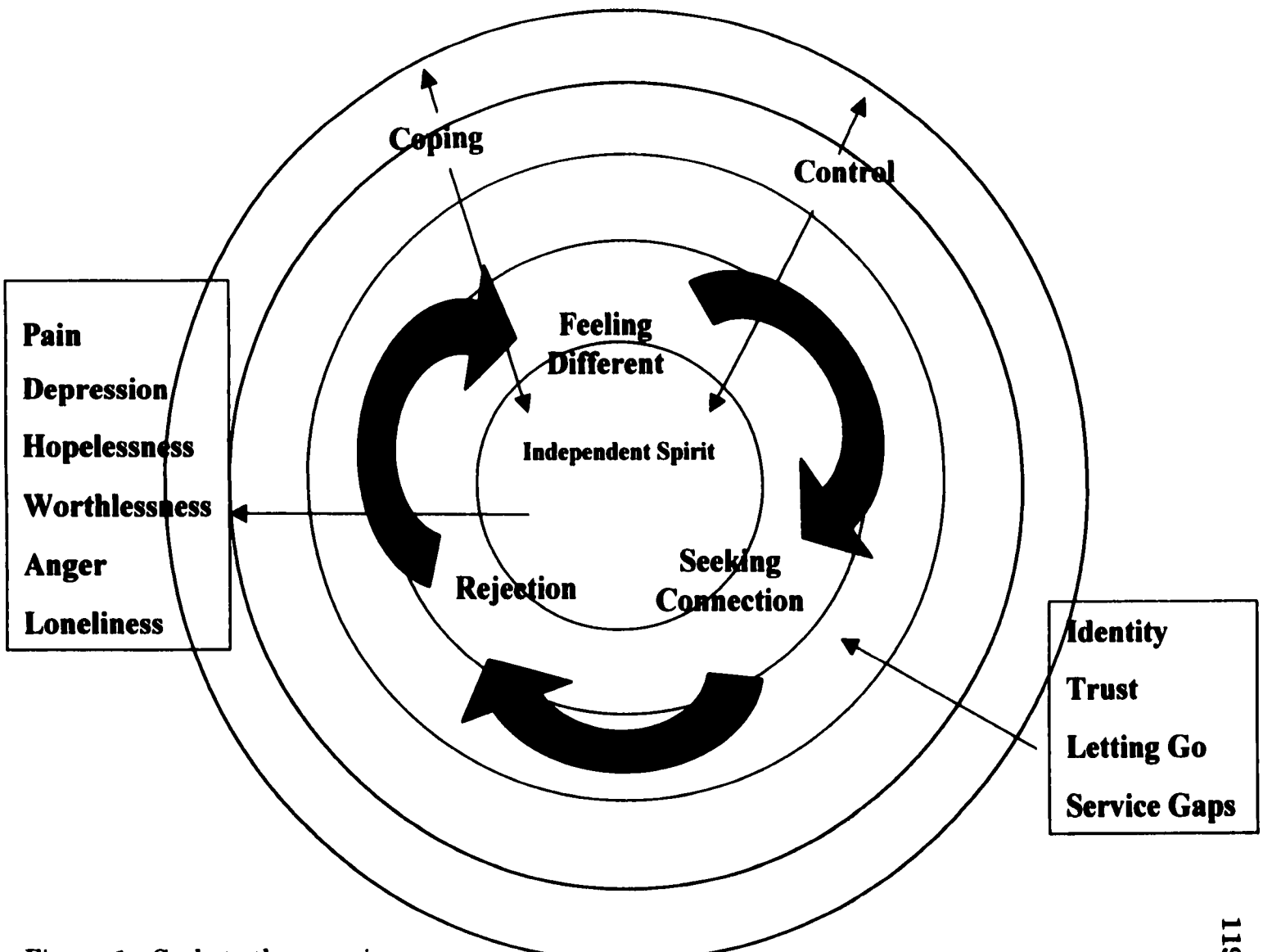

Figure 1. Cycle to the margins.

It has been well-documented that youths may run away from or be pushed out of home environments where relationships between parents and youths are problematic (Adams et al., 1985; Brennan et al., 1978; Crespi & Sabatelli, 1993; Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Ackley, 1997b). In many cases, parental substance misuse, abuse of the youths, or both are instrumental in the dynamics. However, some conversation partners' stories suggest that there may be another element involved in troubled relationships between parents and youths. It appears that some conversation partners' attempts to cope with the overall powerlessness they felt in schools and in other areas of their lives may have created the strain within their families and led to a drain on the families' emotional and financial resources.

While they were locked in the movement to the outer edges of society, all conversation partners were struggling in their attempts to cope with and maintain some sense of control over their lives. All of them experienced feelings of pain, loneliness, hopelessness, worthlessness, and anger long before they became street youths. In addition, one conversation partner had fantasies of revenge. Acting out behaviors, pushing the limits, breaking rules, and using drugs, may have been the only avenues conversation partners could imagine for coping with their feelings. The data suggest that when they felt as though they could no longer endure the constraints of the environment in which they existed, or their parents had exhausted all their

resources in dealing with them, conversation partners found themselves on the streets. This is not to suggest that the transition to the streets was a linear process. Many of them were in and out of their parents' or guardians' homes, other relatives' homes, or drug rehabilitation programs prior to finally living on the streets.

On the Streets

On the streets, conversation partners struggled with a variety of issues. They lived a moment-to-moment, day-by-day existence where street life was a constant, unrelenting presence. They seemed to develop an edge to their personalities because their lives required them to continuously work to protect themselves and their belongings, seek food, shelter, and personal space for both physical and psychological privacy. All conversation partners continued to experience the wide range of feelings that they had prior to life on the streets, that is, pain, loneliness, hopelessness, worthlessness, and anger. In addition, they experienced boredom and depression. In contrast to the belief that street youths begin using substances as a way of coping with the streets, many conversation partners had misused substances prior to street life as a way of coping with the pain, loneliness, hopelessness, and anger they had experienced prior to life on the streets. It should come as no surprise that drug education and resistance programs for youths are not effective. As one conversation partner summed it up, "It's not about Just

Say No." In order to effectively address drug issues, we must teach our children other coping mechanisms. Ideally, we will find ways to prevent the onslaught of negative feelings in the first place.

Once they found themselves on the streets, most conversation partners continued their attempts to connect with others. They described the various ways in which they maintained contact. These included keeping in touch with family members and parents of friends who were still living at home, establishing relationships with clergy, or utilizing the drop-in component of social service agencies. In addition, a few of these young people worked at least sporadically. Hence, they had contact with employers, fellow employees, and the public. This suggests that the assumption by researchers that street youths are completely cut off from the mainstream may not be totally accurate, and there may be avenues for potential intervention that have not yet been tapped into.

Transition

With the exception of conversation partners who had been in the foster care system, all conversation partners wanted to be off the streets almost from the first moments they were on them. Both female conversation partners who had been in foster care became pregnant while they were on the streets, and at that point, they stated that they were willing to seek agency assistance. Thus, the addiction model that has been

applied to the process of youths transitioning off the streets may not be appropriate for all street youths. The addiction model holds that individuals must reach their low point and lose everything they care about prior to becoming suitably motivated to pick up the pieces of their lives. This did not hold true for conversation partners. Instead, they were confronted with a variety of barriers that led to a non-linear progression towards life off the streets.

Barriers

One of the most significant barriers was a lack of knowledge regarding available resources. Consequently, conversation partners vacillated between attempting to make it on their own and connecting with other street youths where they became more savvy and entrenched in the ways of the streets. While both conversation partners who had been in the foster care system knew that resources existed, their experiences had been so negative that they preferred life on the streets.

For conversation partners who did access and receive services, there were many gaps that hindered a smooth transition off the streets. Among these were shelter policies, the lack of coordination between services, and the lack of services for specific groups of youths. These situations forced some conversation partners to the streets where their health and safety

were jeopardized and where they were further exposed to street culture that was permeated by substance use, criminal activities, and violence.

Shelter Policies. According to conversation partners and key informants, policies at emergency, homeless youth shelters require that youths leave the shelter early each morning and return at the end of the day. Although this may be acceptable for youths who are employed or attending school, it is problematic for youths who are sick and for those who are waiting to begin a full time program to get their lives together.

The streets are certainly not a healthy environment for anyone, much less for a sick adolescent. At a minimum, this environment could extend the length of an illness, and there is a good chance that street conditions could exacerbate it. In the case of one conversation partner, his illness and ensuing surgery forced him back to an abusive environment in his parents' home. He subsequently lost his job, his place at a shelter, and ultimately found himself on the streets starting all over again.

Services that require youths to wait for weeks or months prior to beginning a program are, at best, inadequate. Many conversation partners shared that it takes an incredible amount of energy to transition off the streets. Once they were moving in that direction, anything that created a roadblock had the potential to derail the process. One conversation partner's story highlighted this situation. Although she had registered for

the Job Corps Program, she had to wait a month before she could begin. Since she was 17, she was precluded from staying at the shelter and could only use the drop-in services provided there. In essence, she was forced out onto the streets. During this time, she befriended other street youths, began using drugs, and generally learned the culture of the streets. She implied that this made her transition into the Job Corps program and off the streets much more difficult than it might otherwise have been.

Youths attempting to transition off the streets cannot do it without support. Each time they fall through the cracks in the social service system, their chances of success are hindered. It is critical that a solid base of support is in place for them from the beginning of their transition until they have successfully made it off the streets.

Lack of Coordinated Services and Affordable Housing. The lack of rationally planned services and affordable housing in the Bay Area is a significant issue. Some conversation partners' stories suggested that once they accessed emergency shelter assistance, received training, and located employment, it was immensely difficult to find an affordable place to live. Although transitional housing is available, there appears to be a shortage of it. In addition, some conversation partners' stories revealed that there is insufficient low-income housing. One conversation partner's story particularly highlights these issues. She had been in a shelter until she

gave birth to her daughter. After her discharge from the hospital, she and her partner had no place to go while they waited for their names to come to the top of the list for low-income housing. They were unable to locate an affordable apartment, and consequently, rented a motel room. The rate was so exorbitant that they used their entire paychecks and depleted their savings in order to survive while waiting for housing to become available. This situation jeopardized their chance to qualify for housing once their names came to the top of the waiting list. Fortunately, they were able to access the resources they needed to obtain housing. Nevertheless, she shared that one year later they were still in an extremely vulnerable situation just a paycheck away from becoming homeless again.

The lack of affordable housing and knowledge about services led to one conversation partner's life on the streets. She shared that when her mother lost her job and ultimately their home, the family had nowhere to turn but the streets. This conversation partner and her sibling had to quit school. While living in the car, their mother became extremely ill and was taken to the hospital. Because her mother could not take care of her, this conversation partner said that she was left to fend for herself on the streets. Clearly, this story provides evidence that some street youths are falling through the cracks in systems. In this instance, it appears that both the education system and the health care system failed to provide a safety net.

This story highlights a notable problem. There are more homeless families on the streets than ever before. Parents may be faced with the dilemma of forcing one or more children out of the family because they are unable to care for them. This may be due to a variety of reasons: (a) parental illness, (b) insufficient resources and the need to provide for younger children, (c) insufficient space at shelters to accommodate an entire family, and (d) policies at shelters exclusively for women and children that prohibit males over the age of twelve (M. Covert, Emergency Housing Consortium, personal communication, March 16, 1999). At a minimum, there must be safety nets in place to assist families and prevent children from ending up on the streets due to these circumstances.

Lack of Appropriate Services. Specific groups of youths reported a difficult time accessing services. One such group was conversation partners who had come from families with ample financial resources. One conversation partner shared that he was unable to receive support. He said that he was turned away from various sources of assistance due to the assumption that his parents could and would take care of him. Another conversation partner said that there were no services anywhere in the area of his affluent parents' home.

This suggests that the minimal social services available for street youths are directed towards those who come from a lower socioeconomic

status (SES). Youths should not be automatically categorized by their parents' address. Since youths do not have access to their parents' financial resources, one can argue that most youths could be considered low SES. If they had access to financial resources, they would most likely not be seeking services. Moreover, it suggests that communities of financial means may not be aware that the issue of street youths crosses all boundaries, or that they may be suffering from a Not In My Backyard (NIMBY) mentality.

Another group for whom appropriately sensitive services were not available was gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered youths. In addition to struggling with all of the issues of street youths in general, these young people must deal with the additional stigma society assigns to being something other than heterosexual and the resulting discrimination that comes with it. One conversation partner said that gay and lesbian street youths need services that are sensitive to their experiences. The language used by providers must be open and inclusive. They must be in safe environments where they are protected from hurtful comments and acts of violence.

Conversation partners who were 17 years of age, or older, were turned out of, or away from, youth shelters. Some conversation partners shared that they did not want to go to adult shelters for a variety of reasons. The main reason given by two conversation partners was the fear of being

preyed upon by adults in the shelter. However, conversation partners' stories also implied that they did not want to be in an environment with people with whom they felt they could not identify. Going to adult shelters may have been perceived as a form of giving in to homelessness as a permanent way of life. Remaining outside of those shelters may have allowed them to hold out the hope that their lives would be different.

Psychological Barriers. In addition to the physical roadblocks that prevented conversation partners from transitioning off the streets, there were also psychological barriers to overcome. These included finding the strength to follow through on their decisions and commitments, learning to trust others, and letting go of life as they knew it.

Conversation partners implied that many of their early interactions with adults and peers robbed them of the ability to trust. Moreover, most of them had been fighting emotional battles for much of their lives. Their stories suggested that the challenges of life on the streets had depleted their physical resources. Thus, in this stage of physical and emotional exhaustion, many conversation partners expressed that it was difficult to garner the energy needed to locate services, find a job, and follow the rules. It was even more difficult for most conversation partners to believe that things might be better for them.

Although life on the streets was difficult and most conversation partners did not want to be there, their stories implied that letting go was also difficult. On the streets, conversation partners knew, in general, what to expect. They had created routines for themselves. They had relationships with peers and some may have felt accepted for the first time in their lives. Although conversation partners wanted to be off the streets, some of them said that leaping into the world of the unknown was incredibly frightening.

Conversation partners who had been in foster care had an additional barrier with which to contend, abuse by the system. Children are placed in foster care because they are victims of abuse or neglect. Two conversation partners provided evidence that the foster care systems victimizes them over and over again by shuffling them from one placement to another, one counselor to another, and one school to another. They spoke about feeling not cared for, not having enough to eat, and being forced to break off relationships with friends. While youths in general are one of the most highly regulated groups in society, youths within the foster care system are even more regulated. Conversation partners' stories suggest that the discourse used within that system is focused on problems and feels extremely oppressive. It is no wonder that conversation partners who had been in this system chose to live on the streets instead. These young people

were not engaging in risky behavior, they were choosing to survive in the only way they knew how.

What Kids Need

Given these issues, it is no surprise that all conversation partners spoke about the need for sensitivity and emotional support from adults. Their stories suggest that they were in an extremely fragile state when they found their way off the streets. They implied that they needed time to become stabilized and to develop trusting relationships before they could begin the practical tasks to get their lives together. Youths need to feel safe and respected before they will open up to adults. Most conversation partners said that changes will not occur overnight. Learning a new way of being in the world and living life takes time. Most conversation partners said that they knew they would make mistakes, and that they needed adults who would not give up on them.

Most conversation partners said that the single most important thing in their lives was having someone who believed in them. This individual was not necessarily someone affiliated with a social service agency. Often, it was an informal source of support such as a family member, a friend, or a clergy member. In most cases it was someone who continued to show an interest in them in spite of their actions, did not judge their behaviors, and listened to them openly.

All conversation partners were adamant that one of their most frustrating experiences was not being listened to, or taken seriously, by adults. They said that they wanted someone to hear their voices, to be able to share their concerns, ideas, and dreams without being given advice in return. Moreover, many conversation partners spoke about the need to process their experiences in order to move on with their lives. Although conversation partners who received social service agency assistance to transition off the streets were assigned case workers and did have someone to talk with, some of them implied that conversations were guided to meet a particular agenda. Furthermore, their stories suggested that needed the opportunity to grieve over missed opportunities and what might have been had their lives taken a different path.

After the Streets

All conversation partners referred to their current home as a positive place filled with creature comforts, friends, family, and love. However, for most of them, adjusting to home was not easy. On the streets, life had been "in their faces", and conversation partners said that they felt the need for boundaries and walls. Yet, behind walls, many conversation partners shared that they felt isolated from the world. The emotional transition from surviving--protecting themselves and their possessions, finding food, and locating shelter on a daily basis--to living started very slowly and took a

substantial amount of time. For one conversation partner, it took more than two years. Thus, success cannot be measured solely by helping street youths find a job and a place to live. Conversation partners' stories suggest that the need to process their experiences and receive emotional support lasts well beyond the physical transition into a home.

During their adjustment from the streets into housed living, most conversation partners seemed to be performing a juggling act, holding on to the past while simultaneously planning for the future. Reflecting on how their lives might have turned out if they had not gotten off the streets, remembering what led up to being on the streets, and reflecting on the meaning of living on the streets may provide conversation partners with a form of insurance against becoming homeless again. However, some of their stories suggest that being identified as a street youth may also have a negative effect. While the label may be necessary in order for agencies to provide services to street youths, the way an individual is identified within society significantly influences how an individual is perceived and how that same individual will perceive himself or herself. The label that an individual receives is not value-free and comes with stereotypes and quite possibly, prejudice. Society tends to expect youths to pass through adolescence quickly and without incident. Moreover, it frequently views non-conforming adolescents in a negative light. Thus, street youths are

often unjustly perceived as trouble makers, juvenile delinquents, or criminals. If street youths accept the label without question, their self-esteem may be notably impacted. Once they assume the identity of a street youth and all that it connotes, they may begin to question whether they can ever be truly accepted in society. One conversation partner spoke about her fears that her neighbors would find out that she had lived on the streets and would subsequently reject her as a friend. Another conversation partner shared that she sometimes felt as though she was unworthy to move in certain circles because of her past experiences. Fears of rejection and feelings of inadequacy that are grounded in their identity may preclude former street youths from seeking specific opportunities and may have long-term, negative consequences.

Summary

The purpose of this work was to explore the experiences of former street youths who had successfully transitioned off the streets. Specifically, it sought to answer four key questions. Two of these questions, "What does it mean to feel different," and "What is the source of former street youths resilience," appeared to be inextricably linked. Conversation partners were strong individuals who had not only survived but had overcome seemingly insurmountable difficulties. Feeling different, in itself, did not appear to trigger pain for conversation partners. It was the rejection from others

when they sought connection that prompted feelings of hurt, hopelessness, and anger. However, conversation partners were also very determined, high-spirited, and persistent individuals. Their stories suggest that the cycle of seeking connection and being rejected in combination with their temperaments played an important role in their resilience.

The third question, "What prompts street youths to change," assumed that, on some level, street youths accepted the lifestyle of the streets. With the exception of those who had been in foster care, life on the streets was not preferable or acceptable to conversation partners. Their stories provide evidence that they did not need to sink to some low point on the streets prior to realizing that they did not want to be there. Instead, conversation partners had to go through a non-linear process of transition which consisted of piecing together formal and informal sources of support. For conversation partners who had been in foster care, becoming pregnant was the catalyst that prompted their transition off the streets. Neither of these young women wanted to raise their children on the streets, and they had high hopes that their daughters lives would be better than their own had been.

The fourth question was, "How do street youths overcome their sense of difference and reconnect to the mainstream?" It was evident from conversation partners' stories that most of them never fully disconnected

from the mainstream. They remained in contact with housed friends, family members, clergy, employers, or some combination of these. Some conversation partners said that they continued to feel different from individuals in the mainstream precisely because of their experiences on the streets. However, feeling different, in and of itself, was not necessarily viewed negatively. It may be that conversation partners are able to reframe their experience, see themselves as unique human beings, and find strength in the fact that they not only survived but overcame the streets.

In conclusion, it is apparent that some systems are failing youths, their families, and ultimately, society. Young people are our future, yet they often feel disrespected, have few freedoms, are highly regulated, and tend to feel powerless. Many of them feel disconnected from family, peers, school, or some combination of these. Furthermore, when youths employ coping behaviors that society does not condone, they are viewed as the problem, and the youths, their parents, or both are blamed.

Blaming youths or their parents allows society to overlook the ways in which institutions are failing families. System responses that address symptoms are necessary but incomplete. Institutions, whether legal, educational, or medical, tend to take a downstream approach. That is, they deal with the effects or symptoms of an issue and avoid looking upstream at the cause of the issue. We live in a complex world with complicated issues.

Simple solutions, such as assigning blame to youths or their parents are naïve, potentially destructive, and do little to solve the real problems. Only by implementing a multilevel approach, that is, involving youths, parents, schools, agencies, and other community members in defining the problem, its causes, and solutions, will we be able to effectively address the issue of youths on the streets.

We have a choice. We can either invite all youths to participate in meaningful ways in the things that affect their lives, work at understanding them, provide them with respect by listening to them instead of advising and judging, and provide them with responsive and caring support when their families are unable to meet their needs, or we can continue on the path we are currently on. If we continue on the current path, we can expect to see more youths struggle with the issues of substance misuse, teen pregnancy, violence, and homelessness. The social costs, both financial and indirect, are exorbitant. They include, but are not limited to, the costs of welfare, imprisonment and other costs associated with being processed through the legal system, and the indirect costs of illegal activity. The most important cost, however, is that some youths, and possibly their children, will be lost permanently, both directly and indirectly, due to premature deaths, to drugs, violence, and the streets. We can either address the needs of our children now or incur great expense in the future.

Chapter 6

Recommendations

This study resulted in a significant amount of rich data which, in turn, provided the opportunity to fulfill a promise to conversation partners to advance public discourse on the issue of street youths by bringing their voices forward. Conversation partners' individual stories and the analysis of their collective wisdom suggest the following recommendations for research, practice, and policy.

Research

There are seven key recommendations for further study – two are methodological and five continue the substantive exploration undertaken in this research.

1. Conduct a study with a larger sample to provide additional insight and extend the findings obtained through this analysis.

2. Utilize purposive sampling to identify conversation partners whose voices are not reflected in this research, that is, Asian youths and those who live in rural areas.

3. Conduct in-depth research on the subgroups identified, that is, youths whose parents misuse alcohol and other drugs; youths from affluent homes; and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered youths.

4. Conduct research with homeless youths and families from affluent

areas to explore the following: (1) where and how breakdowns between parents, children, and systems, that is, legal, medical, and school, occur even in the presence of ample resources; and (2) the various forms of discrimination youths face in accessing and obtaining services when their parents have ample financial means, but youths have no claim to them.

5. Conduct research on other risk taking behaviors using qualitative methods in order to obtain a better understanding of why youths engage in the behaviors.

6. Conduct an exploration of the meaning and long term consequences of being labeled homeless and the ways in which individuals might resist the negative connotations and stereotypes of that identity.

7. Conduct research with street youths who have been homeless for two years, or more, in order to understand the services and support they need to transition off the streets.

Practice

Ideally, families should have the primary responsibility for raising children. However, it is unrealistic to believe that they can carry the burden alone. Children are influenced by many factors outside the home. Thus, all institutions are needed to help youths become loving, caring, and responsible adults in today's increasingly complex world. Recommendations

for practice are made for two key areas, schools and social service agencies, and include ways to better support parents in their role as such.

Schools. For much of their childhood and adolescence, youths spend many hours in school settings each day. Thus, staff, faculty, and administrators have a unique opportunity provide support to youths and to work with families to create safety nets.

Two of the most critical findings in the data were (a) conversation partners desire for adults to listen to them without judging or lecturing, and (b) conversation partners' need to feel connected to others. To this end, it is recommended that school personnel do the following:

1. Include all youths in meaningful activities as defined by youths.
2. Whenever possible, include a representative sample of youths in dialogue about potential administrative decisions that may impact them.
3. Create opportunities for youths whose behaviors may be challenging to channel their strengths in positive ways.
4. Provide peer mentoring programs and link all students with mentors. Ensure that mentors are aware of counseling and social service resources.
5. Provide counseling services for all students who need them.
6. Recognize that all youths are unique and gifted. Treat them with respect.

School personnel cannot be expected to assume a role beyond acting as communicators of knowledge without support and training. It is recommended that workshops be held to increase awareness of the issue of youth homelessness, warning signs that may indicate a youth is in trouble, steps for intervention, and resources available for youths and their families. Moreover, it is suggested that a parent component be developed that includes workshops similar to those described above.

To prevent youths from falling through the cracks, it is recommended that schools implement a tracking system to follow up on all youths who stop attending school, or attend sporadically, in order to ascertain whether, or not, a referral to support services is needed.

Agencies. Although social service agencies appear to meet youths' basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter, the data reveal five additional ways in which agencies might improve services to youths and their parents.

1. Conduct public awareness campaigns at high schools, community colleges, universities, churches, community centers, and through public service announcements within their service areas in order to (1) increase visibility to those who need services, (2) reduce the stigma attached to being homeless, and (3) focus attention on the issue of youth homelessness which could potentially increase resources available to agencies for services.

2. Explore ways to build coalitions with and provide support to

groups or individuals, that is, faith communities, local merchants, and private citizens, who provide informal assistance to street youths.

3. Provide group sessions for youths to process their experiences. It is recommended that sessions be open to all former street youths regardless of whether, or not, they have used agency services. These might be organized similar to the meetings conducted by Alcoholics Anonymous.

4. Offer workshops on dating, relationships, and parenting skills for former street youths who may have missed out on opportunities to acquire the skills necessary for healthy relationships.

5. Work with schools, faith communities, and community centers to provide workshops and support for parents of youths who are, or may become, street youths.

Policy

Lasting change only comes about through the implementation of new policies. Ten key recommendations are suggested – the first is applicable to both schools and agencies, the second is focused on schools, and the remaining eight are specifically for agencies.

1. Create and enforce zero tolerance policies against all harassment, discrimination, and exclusionary practices in all environments that serve youths.

2. Create more job training, mentoring, and employment assistance

programs for youths who are not college-bound.

3. Develop more flexible shelter policies regarding hours of operation for youths who need a safe daytime environment, such as those who are on waiting lists to enter job training programs or for youths who are sick.

4. Create shelters specifically for youths ages 18 to 23.

5. Create shelter services and environments specifically for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered youths.

6. Create more transitional housing programs for youths.

7. Build additional low-income housing. Designate a percentage of it as top priority for young people moving out of transitional housing.

8. Create high quality, affordable child care services accessible to youths transitioning off the streets. These might be linked to transitional or low-income housing programs and should not be exclusively available to youths in those housing programs.

9. Create an integrated system of services to ensure a smooth and steady transition off the streets.

10. Examine the role of inappropriate foster care in driving youths onto the streets. Develop, implement, and evaluate system reforms based on the findings.

Summary

This was an exploratory study which resulted in rich, thick descriptions of former street youths' lives and led to numerous recommendations for research, practice, and policy. Although additional studies with larger, more diverse samples may reveal new insights, one thing seems clear from the findings of this study – there are a number of young people who are struggling against significant odds to become healthy, responsible adults.

Although families must have the primary responsibility for raising healthy children, they cannot bear this burden alone. Parents are only one of the many influences in youths' lives. Moreover, youths spend much of their lives on school campuses, and the interactions that occur there have a significant impact on them. Thus, it seems logical for schools to work with parents and social service agencies to create safety nets for youths. This collaboration could result in fewer high school dropouts, more graduates, fewer disciplinary issues, more positive school climates, fewer complaints from neighbors and merchants, and reductions in crime.

In an ideal world, all youths would be raised and schooled in environments that are conducive to healthy development and reaching adulthood without significant incident. However, that is not reality. When things fall apart, there must be resources available to assist youths and

their families. Nevertheless, agencies need not bear the burden alone. In this time of diminishing resources, it is imperative that coalitions be created. There are potentially untapped resources such as members of faith communities, other private citizens, and local merchants who might be willing to work together with social service agencies to strengthen networks of support for youths.

The issue of street youths cuts across all demographic, ethnic, racial, gender, sexual identity, and religious boundaries. No individual or family is invulnerable to the issue. In general, most youths between the ages of 17 and 23 are working or are away at college. However, they usually have the benefit of being able to go to their parents or other relatives for various forms of support. Most street youths do not have that luxury. Moreover, the foster care system which was established to protect youths is at best, inadequate and at worst, abusive. There must be an integrated system of both short term and long term services in place that is sufficient to meet the needs of all who require them. Moreover, services must meet both physical and psychological needs. It is imperative that as a society, we ensure that all young people have the support they need to become healthy, productive members.

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Appendix A

Letter to the Editor

April 21, 1999

Dear Editor,

While I am horrified and deeply saddened by the murders of the young men and women at Columbine High School, I feel that you failed to address the deeper, underlying issues at work on a societal level in your editorial dated 4/21/99.

I agree that access to guns and images of violence in mass culture are part of the problem. However, they are just the tip of the iceberg. Why are the youths who have been involved in "indiscriminate shootings and mass killings at schools in the last two years", and who come from middle-class homes, pulling the triggers? Although it is unclear what "sort of homes" these young men came from, blaming parents or the youths themselves is too simple. Adolescents are influenced by a much larger set of social forces. I believe that on a deeper level, what happened in Colorado has to do with issues of difference and alienation.

These two young men clearly felt different. They had been labeled by others as "the trenchcoat mafia". They were on the outside. They were not born that way. Alienation develops as a result of complex interactions with a variety of social forces over a long period of time. When individuals are

disenfranchised, they feel powerless to do anything to change their situation. Many adolescents have not developed sufficient skills to understand all the options they have to address the problems in their lives, and they often respond in negative ways. Fortunately, the ways in which they respond are usually fairly benign. However, in far too many instances, adolescents "drop out" either literally or figuratively. They may leave school; they may just "do their time" and barely get by; they may use drugs to numb the pain they feel; they may attempt suicide; they may act out in a variety of other ways including committing petty crimes. Some of them do become violent.

However, it is not just the fact that they have access to guns and have been exposed to violent images in movies or video games that leads them to this behavior. Look at the example we, as a society, set for them. We think nothing of expending minimal time and effort "negotiating" a settlement between the Kosovars and Serbians and then, when things don't work out the way we want them to, we send in the "tools of war", bombing them night after night until they succumb to our wishes.

It is time to wake up. If we expect our young people to behave differently, then we need to set a better example. Anyone who knows about raising children will tell you that it doesn't matter so much what we say to our children, the examples we set for them speak much louder than our

words. We must not only teach our children conflict resolution, we must practice it in our own lives and as a country. Furthermore, we must critically examine the ways in which we address and accept (or don't accept) all difference in this society. This includes race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, learning dis-abilities, style of clothes, choice of music, and the multitude of ways in which human beings can be different from each other. We need to explore ways to ensure that everyone's voice is heard. Finally, we must include adolescents in the dialogue. Far too often, we shut them out because we believe that we (adults) know what is best. However, any solutions we create that do not involve them will fail. If we care about our youth and are honestly interested in addressing the issue of youth violence, we must bring a diverse group of community members, including adolescents who have been marginalized, together to define the problem and create the solutions.

Anne L. Roesler, MPH(c)

Health Education Consultant

Appendix B

Human Subjects-Institutional Review Board

Letters of Approval

San José State
UNIVERSITY

Office of the Academic Vice President
Associate Vice President Graduate Studies and Research
One Washington Square
San José, CA 95192-0025
Voice: 408-924-2480
Fax: 408-924-2477
E-mail: gstudies@wahoo.sjsu.edu
http://www.sjsu.edu

TO: Anne L. Roesler
20175 Williamsburg Lane
Saratoga, CA 95070

FROM: Nabil Ibrahim,
Acting AVP, Graduate Studies & Research

DATE: June 4, 1999

The Human Subjects-Institutional Review Board has approved your request to use human subjects in the study entitled:

"An Exploration of the lived Experiences of Street Youths who have Transitioned from Homelessness to Independent, Domiciled Living"

This approval is contingent upon the subjects participating in your research project being appropriately protected from risk. This includes the protection of the anonymity of the subjects' identity when they participate in your research project, and with regard to any and all data that may be collected from the subjects. The Board's approval includes continued monitoring of your research by the Board to assure that the subjects are being adequately and properly protected from such risks. If at any time a subject becomes injured or complains of injury, you must notify Nabil Ibrahim, Ph.D., immediately. Injury includes but is not limited to bodily harm, psychological trauma and release of potentially damaging personal information.

Please also be advised that all subjects need to be fully informed and aware that their participation in your research project is voluntary, and that he or she may withdraw from the project at any time. Further, a subject's participation, refusal to participate, or withdrawal will not affect any services the subject is receiving or will receive at the institution in which the research is being conducted.

If you have any questions, please contact me at (408) 924-2480.

The California State University:
Chancellor's Office
Bakersfield, Chico, Dominguez Hills, Fresno, Fullerton, Hayward, Humboldt, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Maritime Academy, Monterey Bay, Northridge, Pomona, Sacramento, San Bernardino, San Diego, San Francisco, San José, San Luis Obispo, San Marcos, Sonoma, Stanislaus

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TO: Anne L. Roesler
20175 Williamsburg Lane
Saratoga, CA 95070

FROM: Nabil Ibrahim,
AVP, Graduate Studies & Research

DATE: January 27, 2000

The Human Subjects-Institutional Review Board has approved your request to use human subjects in the study entitled:

> "An Exploration of the Lived Experience of Street Youths who have Transitioned from Homelessness to Independent, Domiciled Living"

This approval is contingent upon the subjects participating in your research project being appropriately protected from risk. This includes the protection of the anonymity of the subjects' identity when they participate in your research project, and with regard to any and all data that may be collected from the subjects. The Board's approval includes continued monitoring of your research by the Board to assure that the subjects are being adequately and properly protected from such risks. If at any time a subject becomes injured or complains of injury, you must notify Nabil Ibrahim, Ph.D., immediately. Injury includes but is not limited to bodily harm, psychological trauma and release of potentially damaging personal information.

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If you have any questions, please contact me at (408) 924-2480.

The California State University:
Chancellor's Office
Bakersfield, Chico, Dominguez Hills, Fresno, Fullerton, Hayward, Humboldt, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Maritime Academy, Monterey Bay, Northridge, Pomona, Sacramento, San Bernardino, San Diego, San Francisco, San José, San Luis Obispo, San Marcos, Sonoma, Stanislaus

Appendix C

Agreement to Participate in Research

San José State
UNIVERSITY

College of Applied Sciences and Arts
Department of Health Science
One Washington Square
San José, CA 95192-0052
Voice: 408-924-2970
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http://www.sjsu.edu/depts/cass/dept/hs.html

Agreement to Participate in Research

Responsible Investigator: Anne L. Roesler, MPHc
Title of Protocol: An Exploration of the Lived Experiences of Street Youths Who Have Transitioned from Homelessness to Independent, Domiciled Living

I agree to participate in the above named study which is a partial requirement for the Degree of Master of Public Health at San Jose State University.

I understand that the purpose of this study is to obtain a better understanding of the experiences of individuals who were homeless as minors and the process by which they transitioned to independent, housed living. I acknowledge that findings from this study may be useful in the future development of research, policy, and programs that would benefit other homeless youths by providing the support and resources that would enable them to successfully transition from, and remain off of, the streets.

I understand that I will be asked to participate in one or two personal interviews with the investigator. The interviews will be audio taped and will require a total of two to four hours of my time. They will be conducted in my home or another mutually agreed upon location. I understand that the tapes will be kept in a protected location, in order to maintain confidentiality, and that they will be erased at the conclusion of the research.

I understand that the risks of participating in this study, if any, are minimal. I will be asked to recall information about my past that may cause slight discomfort. However, I understand that the questions asked during interviews are unlikely to be different from questions encountered in the course of conversations with my family, friends, or social service workers, and therefore, do not pose any undue risk.

I am aware that the potential personal benefits from participating in this study include the possibility of my thinking about my life and my experiences in new ways, and that I may gain new insight into my personal strengths and capacities.

I understand that the results of this study may be published. However, I am aware that, in order to ensure my privacy, I will be asked to provide a pseudo name to the investigator. If published, the study results may include verbal quotes but will not identify me by name. I also understand that I may request a summary of the study from the investigator.

I understand that I will receive $25.00 in appreciation of the time and knowledge that I am sharing with the investigator.

I understand that I have the right to ask questions about this study, that I may decline to answer any question(s) during the interviews, and that I may withdraw

Initials _____

The California State University:
Chancellor's Office
Bakersfield, Chico, Dominguez Hills, Fresno, Fullerton, Hayward, Humboldt, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Maritime Academy, Monterey Bay, Northridge, Pomona, Sacramento, San Bernardino, San Diego, San Francisco, San José, San Luis Obispo, San Marcos, Sonoma, Stanislaus

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my consent to participate at any time during this study. I understand that my participation is completely voluntary and that choosing not to participate in the study, or in any part of the study, will not affect my relations with San Jose State University or the agency through which my name was obtained.

Questions about research procedures or participating in this study may be directed to Anne L. Roesler, MPHc, (408) 868-9235, or Dr. Kathleen Roe, Health Science Department, San Jose State University, (408) 924-2976. Any questions or concerns about research participant rights, or in the event of a research-related injury, contact Nabil Ibrahim, Ph.D., Acting Associate Academic Vice President for Graduate Studies and Research, (408) 924-2480.

I understand that my signature on this form demonstrates my willingness to participate in this study, and I acknowledge that I have received a signed copy of this form.

Signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's Signature _____ Date _____

The California State University:
Chancellor's Office
Bakersfield, Chico, Dominguez Hills,
Fresno, Fullerton, Hayward, Humboldt,
Long Beach, Los Angeles, Maritime Academy,
Monterey Bay, Northridge, Pomona,
Sacramento, San Bernardino, San Diego,
San Francisco, San José, San Luis Obispo,
San Marcos, Sonoma, Stanislaus

Appendix D

Questions

Prior to homelessness – main question

Please tell me about your experience growing up.

Probes. Would you describe a typical day in your life?

Please tell me about your family.

Please tell me about any other people you were close to.

Please describe your school experience?

Becoming homeless – main question

Please tell me your story. How did you become homeless?

Homelessness – main question

Please tell me about a typical day on the streets?

Probes. Please tell me about the relationships you had with others while living on the streets.

Would you describe how you survived on the streets?

Would you describe what it meant to be homeless?

Transition – main question

Please tell me how you were able to transition off the streets.

Probes. Would you tell me how you came to the decision to transition off the streets?

Please describe what made it possible for you to make the transition.

Please tell me about the relationships you have with others now.

What does "home" mean to you? What is "home"?

Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experience, or you?